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A Critique of Western-centric Views on Imperialism and China

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Theme

- Western-centric views on imperialism and China have a long tradition in historiography. Invoking Marxist vocabulary to (re)interpret or further extend this tradition, however, is a recent phenomenon.
- By “Western-centric” I mean the act of ignoring, discounting, or denying imperialism as a historically specific cum pervasively existing system in the modern world – a system centering on the hitherto unrivalled hegemony of the capitalist core of the world.
- The claim that China has always embodied elements of imperialism, dating back to at least the near pre-modern epoch, has persisted in Western historiography. The further claim that it is today approaching the point of fully-fledged imperialism, defined according to the Marxist theory of imperialism as the actual form of capitalism in history, is an invention by Western-centric political left.
- Below, I attempt to articulate the counter-argument that these Western-centric views both misinterpret China and mislead the understanding of the political economy of the world we are in.

The Hotchpotch of Views

- Discernibly, there are two long lasting arguments in the relevant literature of Western historiography on China and imperialism.
- First, the argument that “China has long been imperialist” – claiming that it was an empire embodying conquests and “settlers colonialism” in the near pre-modern epoch, and some core elements of this have persisted until today.

This argument follows various non-Marxist theories of imperialism, where imperialism is claimed to be no more than pre-modern remnants and it will wither away along with capitalist modernization.

- Second, the argument of “high-level equilibrium trap” – China could not have embarked on the path of modernization without its encounter with the West (a painful process notwithstanding).

Not by coincidence, this resonates with the theory of “imperialism, pioneer of capitalism” in a particular Marxist tradition that is Western-centric both in form and in substance.

- The recently-emerged Western-centric left's views somehow preserve the core elements of both of the two arguments, with some modifications for assessing the reality today.
- The first argument can be invoked for accusing China today on questions of Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet, and the South China Sea, as well as Korea and Vietnam in history, etc. Irrespective of the sufficiency or otherwise of empirical knowledge, the accusation falls back on the supposedly universal truth of the principle of national (actually “local”) self-determination.
- Elsewhere I have argued that upholding such a “universal truth” is an outright blasphemy of historical justice and covers up the fact that we are living in an inter-state system reigned by Western hegemony.
- The ambivalent position about the second argument is revealing.

Leaving aside what imperialism did to China in history, the protagonists invert the argument to accuse China today of exploiting the rest of the non-Western world. This entails some problematic views on the creation, distribution and utilization of value in the world reigned by the West.

Marxist Theories

- Marxist theories of imperialism necessarily concern its materiality as fundamental. Imperialism is not at all a pre-modern remnant. It is capitalist in nature, driven by the logic of systemic capital accumulation.
- In this light, imperialism can be seen as the spatial expansion of the system of capitalism, emanating from the Global North – the capitalist core that is Western Europe plus North America and Japan later on – and progressively incorporating every society of the remaining world (the Global South) into its remit.
- The modern world is under the “world history” à la Marx, which can be interpreted as the conquests of the world by imperialism. The materiality of this conquest is Northern capital exploiting Southern labor – via plundering and fraudery plus seemingly free trade and investment, underpinned by military-political-ideological hegemony and financial and technical monopolies.
- Two sides of the same process on the world scale: labor (free or unfree) creates surplus, and surplus (as surplus value or otherwise) fits systemic capital accumulation.

- Surplus transfer is part of the broader process of polarizing development between the North and the South.

Already the extraction of Southern surplus reinforces the advantage of the North in capital accumulation, and with it technological and financial monopolies. Furthermore, the unequal distribution of surplus necessarily entails unequal ability in withstanding the intrinsic economic crises of capitalism.

- Further to the above, concerning materiality, is the historical specificity of Marxist theories of imperialism.
- Luxemburg-type underconsumption theories have been in vogue from time to time, because they seem to easily fit the political correctness of social democratism. These theories might or might not have elements of truth depending on particular historical circumstances. At any rate, they cannot be general theories of imperialism.
- The reason: a low (or a fall in the) consumption rate might, but need not, lead to demand falling short of supply and therefore profitability decline leading to crises of over-accumulation.

In principle, there is at least the possibility that investment making up for consumption as a source of demand, by means of creating income.

- Lenin-type theories of imperialism as monopoly capitalism could be seen as history-specific at another level. The strives to capture super-profits might well be based on monopoly and capital export, but the reverse deduction need not hold – monopoly and capital export need not strive for capturing super-profits.
- The latter argument is an anti-thesis of Leninist theory in this particular respect. This antithesis might not be valid in Lenin's times amid the prevalence of inter-imperial rivalry. But it cannot be ruled out in other times, not least in the case of China vis-à-vis the imperial incumbents.
- Lenin and contemporaries' concern with the overwhelmingly urgent issues of their times, namely, wars (among imperialist powers) and revolutions (within imperialist nations), also necessarily results in the history-specificity of their theories of imperialism.
- Recall that imperialism is about capital-labor confrontation on the world scale.

Whether inter-imperial rivalry would emerge from systemic capital accumulation is a secondary question.

The importance of revolutions within imperialist nations depends on the broader context, i.e., the interaction between two pairs of struggles – national labor vs. national capital and Southern labor vs. Northern capital.

- Seen from the perspective of humankind as a whole, the “development of underdevelopment” – Northern capital striving to pursue super-profits by means of extracting the surplus of Southern labor – is the first and foremost important question of imperialism.
- International conflicts of all kinds nowadays ought to be assessed in relation to this issue.

Ignoring, discounting, or denying the centrality of this issue is Western-centric. They are tantamount to covering up the hegemony of the capitalist core in the world from the beginning of the modern all the way until now.

- By extension, the politics of imperialism is inseparable from the economics of imperialism. There is no such thing as inter-imperial rivalry, if pursuing super-profits via surplus transfer from the Global South does not characterize one or both of the two parties involved.

Nor can the pursuit of super-profits this way be successful without the politics of imperialism.

China onto the Stage

- The mosaic of theories of imperialism, Marxist or non-Marxist provided that they could be made hostile to China, have been picked up by Western-centric left of various persuasions.
- Simple labelling is a favorite trick of impatient activists or demagogues.

Mimicking Western-centric views in historiography is critical in appearance but apologetic in reality.

Invoking Luxemburg-type theory of underconsumption is a fashionable move that flatters and comforts all the major political forces in the West today.

Applying Lenin's five criteria of imperialism, with no qualifications attached to their historical-specificity, to gauge Chinese political economy is no more than a fundamentalist and thus dogmatic action.

- Ultimately, what is absolutely necessary for assessing China in the lens of imperialism is hard evidence of systemic surplus transfer from the rest of the world to China.

- The existing scholarship provides no evidence of this kind. Systemic surplus transfer to China does not appear to be in existence.

To the contrary, there is evidence of systemic surplus transfer from China to the rest of the world, throughout the market-reform era that is also the era of neoliberal globalization.

- Insofar as there are traces of surplus transfer from the rest of the Global South to China, these are not at all systemic – and not of super-profits, at any rate.
- In the circumstances where China forms the capability of exporting high-tech products, these are not at all signs of building up monopolies.

As a general rule, they have rather resulted in the so-called *baicaijia* (“cabbage pricing”) phenomena – providing these products at low prices, thus undermining the monopoly rents previous enjoyed by Western corporations.

- In the circumstances where China invests in building up productive capacities in the rest of the Global South, these cannot be unquestionably deemed exporting excess capacities.

The possibility of fostering the creation of value, therefore income and demand, should also be considered.

Balanced views of the two contrasting possibilities are needed. Given the fact that China has been running trade deficits with the rest of the Global South in most years since the turn of the century, the “value-creation” judgment seems to have more elements of truth than the “exporting excess capacity” one.

- Finally, a few words on Western-centric views on the relevant politics.

Accurate knowledge about history, and the real situations, is indispensable.

Suffices it to say that, in the cases of Hong Kong and Taiwan (where insufficiency in knowledge is still a problem but not so much a problem), what have been going on are simply pre-capitalistic local chauvinism pertaining to capitalistic Western hegemony.