Gabriel Kuhn
Oppressor and Oppressed Nations
Sketching a Taxonomy of Imperialism
June 15, 2017

Retrieved on 2020-04-11 from blackrosefed.org

theanarchistlibrary.org

Oppressor and Oppressed Nations

Sketching a Taxonomy of Imperialism

Gabriel Kuhn

June 15, 2017

Contents

imperialist periphery and dependency are important as possible instigators of struggles in the core and in the oppressed nations, but they themselves have little potential to threaten the imperialist order. Struggles in sub-imperialist nations require specific analysis. Often, they are similar to struggles in the imperialist periphery and dependency; in certain cases, however, when they concern central links in the imperialist order, their potential is significantly bigger. A current example are workers' struggles in China.

6. In the imperialist core, various initiatives are of importance: campaigns for global justice around issues that broad sections of the population can relate to, for example Third World debt; the redistribution of funds to progressive actors in the oppressed nations; political alliances with migrants; linking anti-racist and anti-patriarchal struggles to anti-imperialist struggles; and developing forms of economic production, distribution, and consumption that undermine capitalist demands of permanent growth and circulation.

Gabriel Kuhn is an Austrian-born author living in Sweden involved in radical labor and migrant solidarity efforts. He is the author of numerous books including Antifascism, Sports, Sobriety: Forging A Militant Working-Class Culture and is a Central Committee member of the syndicalist union, Sveriges Arbetares Centralorganisation (SAC).

With much of the left's analysis of imperialism trending towards simplistic binaries of imperialism and anti-imperialism, a deeper analysis of the relationships between states created by modern imperialism and colonialism are desperately needed. This thoughtful essay by Sweden-based author Gabriel Kuhn provides attempts to outline how we might form an alternate and more useful model of seeing states and how they relate to each other in the global capitalist order. While we may quibble with some of the conclusions offered, this piece is an excellent start.

Introduction

In recent years, the left has shown a renewed interest in anti-imperialism. This is an encouraging development, since global economic injustice remains one of the most glaring contradictions of the capitalist order. After having been a central part of anti-capitalist struggles in the 1970s, anti-imperialism largely vanished from left radars. Among the reasons were the demise of socialist national liberation movements as well as the often disappointing record of them seizing power; the defeat of anti-imperialist armed groups in the metropolis; the fall of the Soviet Union and its consequences; the adaptation of anti-imperialist rhetoric by reactionary actors; the uncanny relationship between anti-imperialism and anti-Semitism; and the substitution of multitudes fighting various forms of oppression for a much more straightforward good-vs.-bad script.

Among the reasons for the resurgence of anti-imperialism are the limitations of a postmodern anti-oppression analysis unearthing so many injustices that it can't properly analyze and attack any of them; the urgency of organizing effective left-wing resistance in the face of neoliberal domination and the increasing

threat of fascism; the reemergence of internationalist perspectives through the support of struggles in the periphery, especially in Kurdistan; and the ongoing – and growing – disparities in the global distribution of wealth, not least highlighted by authors hardly known as radicals such as Thomas Pikkety (*Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, 2013) or Branko Milanovi (*Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization*, 2016).

English-language publications that have brought left-wing anti-imperialism back to the fore are Zak Cope's *Divided World Divided Class: Global Political Economy and the Stratification of Labour Under Capitalism* (2012), Samir Amin's *The Implosion of Contemporary Capitalism* (2013), Gabriel Kuhn's *Turning Money into Rebellion: The Unlikely Story of Denmark's Revolutionary Bank Robbers* (2014), the 2015 *Monthly Review* special issue on "The New Imperialism", and John Smith's *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century: Globalization, Super-Exploitation, and Capitalism's Final Crisis* (2016).

At the same time, the picture of what imperialism is and, perhaps more importantly, what it looks like on the ground remains murky. Sometimes, anti-imperialism is used as a synonym for anti-colonialism. Sometimes, it is used whenever one nation attacks another. And in its crudest form, it simply means anti-Americanism. This is no viable basis for effective political resistance. If we want to combat imperialism – which is necessary to combat capitalism – we need to have an understanding of what it looks like, how it functions, and where we need to hit it.

This also requires translating some very abstract concepts into a language that becomes relevant for activists. The abstract concepts and related debates are important (unless they deteriorate into irrelevant quibbles between big men, which, sadly, happens regularly), but they are unlikely to generate much action if they stay in ivory towers. How do we fight "generalized-monopoly capitalism," "super-exploitation," or "unequal exchange"? Some concrete and tangible questions are: Who benefits from imperialism? Are there centers of imperialist power? How can imperialism be attacked?

integration into and/or their proximity to the imperialist core, but the nations themselves are denied self-determination and remain oppressed.

Conclusion: Remarks on Anti-Imperialist Practice

If the outline sketched here has any validity, the following are, in my eyes, the most important implications for anti-imperialist practice:

1. The struggle against imperialism must be led by indigenous movements and progressive working-class and peasant movements in the Global South.

2. Especially in nations with a weak education system and a high level of government repression, alliances with the progressive sectors of the bourgeoisie are mandatory, no matter the dangers they entail.

3. It is crucial to support experiments searching for economic alternatives to capitalism. These include cooperative farms, worker-controlled factories, and exchange economies. Imperialism cannot be separated from capitalism and to fight it means to establish a different economic order.

4. Sub-imperialist countries pose no threat to the imperialist order. They might pose a threat to the current imperialist core and can possibly enforce a more balanced distribution of imperialist power and wealth, but they are unable (and unwilling) to change the imperialist system itself.

5. The most important struggles occur in the oppressed nations and in the imperialist core nations. It is at both ends of the imperialist system where it is most vulnerable. Struggles in the

e. **South Africa** is a particular case. It is sub-imperialist with regard to its role in (particularly southern) Africa. It is also the home of a white settler community that can be considered part of the imperialist core. At the same time, the majority of the country's population lives under Third World conditions. No other country (except Israel, perhaps) straddles the boundaries of the categories used here in more ways.

3. Oppressed Nations

Oppressed nations are nations whose citizens, by and large, are victims of the imperialist order, notwithstanding national bourgeoisies and privileged expatriate communities.

This category includes all nations in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, and Oceania, except the ones listed in other categories above. There are huge differences between these nations (Egypt is not Chad, and Malaysia not the Solomon Islands), but they are all exploited and oppressed by the imperialist nations and have little (or no) influence on global power structures. The differences between these nations must be analyzed on the basis of their respective histories, the colonial (and neocolonial) regimes they were and are subjected to, their assets in terms of raw materials and manpower, their landmass and location, and their populations' racial identification.

This category also includes nations that are not united in a nation state, except for those belonging to the imperialist periphery (see above). Concretely, this means the peoples of occupied territories such as Palestine and the Western Sahara, nations divided into different nation states such as the Kurds, First Nations in the Americas and in Oceania, traveling people such as Roma and Sinti, and the indigenous populations of French and American overseas territories. Members of these nations have sometimes relatively privileged access to wealth and opportunity because of their partial

In the 1970s, when the anti-imperialist movement was at its peak, the world was divided into rather simple categories: First World nations were the villains, Third World nations the victims, and – depending on one's ideological persuasion – Second World nations heroic allies to the Third World, neutral, or an equally imperialist Soviet-led bloc. Today, things have become messier; or, let's say, the mess has become more obvious.

Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory, employing the categories of core, semi-periphery, and periphery, is more sophisticated, but not bereft of problems. It is strongly based on economic data, pays little attention to differences within the three main categories, and has difficulties accounting for the at times enormous contradictions within single countries.

A proper taxonomy of imperialism needs to take into consideration not only the relationship between economic systems, political formations, and cultural hegemonies, but also the one between nations and classes.

I am not claiming to provide any answers in this sketch. I am trying to help facilitate a discussion that will lead to a picture of the imperialist world complex enough to function as a base for effective anti-imperialist resistance.

Among the questions that motivated me to draw this sketch are the following:

- Why are there oppressor nations that never had colonies or even once were colonies themselves?
- What is the status of nations serving the imperialist system as financial centers or tax havens?
- Where are the countries of the former Second World positioned in today's global order?
- What is the role of Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs) or the often cited BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa)?

- Is there any such thing as an internal colony?
- Can oppressor nations and oppressed nations coexist in one and the same nation state?
- How do class formations and migration affect the picture?

The sketch presented here is based on involvement in internationalist and anti-imperialist projects, the study of relevant literature, and, most importantly, the experiences of many years of traveling on all continents, meeting with laborers and peasants as well as with politicians and academics. While the paper will hopefully be relevant for all readers with anti-imperialist leanings, the target audience of the practical implications are anti-imperialist activists in the First World such as myself. People in different positions will discuss the forms their own resistance needs to take. The trick is to combine the respective approaches into a common effective movement.

Working Definition

The question of whether a certain country, policy, or action is imperialist, is, first and foremost, a matter of definition. Whether China is an imperialist country or not, does, for example, not depend on whether the essence of the nation of China contains an imperialist element, but on whether the country's role in the global economic and political order fits our definition of what imperialism is. In other words, we can't talk about imperialism (or anti-imperialism) and hope to clarify things without providing a definition of what we are talking about.

Any discussion can come to an instant halt when passionately arguing over the best definition of what is being discussed. There are certain criteria that seem commonly accepted as qualities of a good definition (it ought to be coherent and clear, neither too wide

other words, China is not (yet) a rival of the imperialist core nations.

b. **Russia and its Second World allies**: The current Russian Federation is the successor of powers with imperialist ambitions, that is, the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union. This legacy remains, but Russia and its current allies (predominantly former Soviet Republics, such as Belarus and Kazakhstan) cannot compete with the Triad. Some former Soviet Republics, most notably the Ukraine, are caught in a struggle between forces remaining loyal to the Russian project on the one hand, and forces who want to enter the Triad's periphery on the other.

c. There are three nations in the Middle East/Arab Peninsula with an imperialist legacy that continue to act as sub-imperialist powers: **Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia**. Due to both internal rivalries and the strong efforts of the imperialist core to control the region, the reach of these nations remains limited (although it can be felt in many ways, especially in financial and military support for ideological allies). There are also huge differences in how these nations relate to the Triad: Iran is sub-imperialist in the purest sense, while Saudi Arabia could count as part of the imperialist dependency, and Turkey as part of the imperialist periphery.

d. **Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay** are characterized by huge income gaps and the oppression of indigenous nations, yet they have a high level of industrialization, well-established middle and upper classes, and an economic sway over South America, which renders them sub-imperialist. (Arguably, Mexico plays a similar role in Central America but has less economic strength and is overshadowed by its neighbor to the north, the United States.)

imperialist periphery, but their geographic isolation speaks against this.

iii. **Some micro-states in the Caribbean** (such as Bermuda or the Bahamas), the Pacific (such as Nauru), and the Indian Ocean (such as Mauritius and the Seychelles).

iv. **Dependencies of imperialist nations** such as the French overseas territories (e.g. French-Polynesia, Guadeloupe, Martinique, New Caledonia, and Réunion) and U.S. American overseas territories (e.g. American Samoa, Guam, and Puerto Rico). It is important to note that the indigenous peoples of these territories must be considered oppressed nations (see below).

2. Sub-Imperialist Nations

Sub-imperialist nations are nations outside of the imperialist core with imperialist ambitions. They can act as regional imperialist powers and/or aim to enter the imperialist core, either as allies of the current bloc or as rivals. Sub-imperialist qualities also apply to imperialist core nations that act as regional centers of power, for example Australia in the Asia-Pacific region.

Sub-imperialist nations can be divided into five (quite distinct) subcategories:

a. **China** is possibly the most contested example, as some would define it as an imperialist nation (see, for example, N.B. Turner's *Is China an Imperialist Country?*, 2015), while others would strongly reject the characterization of China as imperialist in any form. In my understanding, China has imperialist ambitions, but no matter how much it aims to extend its reach (especially in Asia and Africa), the vast majority of its population is still exploited by the Triad. In

nor too small, etc.), but there is no objective measure to identify the one that trumps all others. In order to make sense of the following pages, I therefore need to ask the reader to accept the working definition of imperialism offered here – which, of course, does not mean that it can't be criticized.

I will not follow an exclusively Marxist take. In *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917), Lenin defined imperialism thus: "Imperialism is capitalism at that stage of development at which the dominance of monopolies and finance capital is established; in which the export of capital has acquired pronounced importance; in which the division of the world among the international trusts has begun, in which the division of all territories of the globe among the biggest capitalist powers has been completed." This economic approach is of crucial importance, but there have been others within the left. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said defined imperialism as "the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory". This, of course, is very brief. The working definition I am suggesting is the following:

Imperialism is a system where a conglomerate of capitalists, politicians, and security forces asserts control over a particular territory and its population to increase its own wealth. In order to establish its authority, it uses ideological means (racism), cultural means (proselytism), political means (direct or indirect colonialism), economic means (exploitation), and military means (the stationing of its own security forces, the employment of mercenaries, or the creation of dependent local police and military). A characteristic (albeit not necessary) feature of imperialism is the conglomerate sharing a part of the extracted wealth with the population in its home countries to secure that population's support for the imperialist project. Therefore, labor aristocracies are an inherent feature of the imperialist order.

It is important to note that, according to this definition, imperialism doesn't simply mean that a certain population wants to ex-

tend the territory it controls. Fights over territory have been part of humanity since time eternal, caused by competition over natural resources and other factors. This is not imperialism. Imperialism means to extend one's sphere of control in order to institutionalize the exploitation of the (human and natural) resources of the territories brought under one's control. This is why any analysis of the former Soviet Union having been an imperialist power must imply an understanding of the Soviet Union not as a socialist country but a state capitalist country. In my understanding, this analysis is correct and also applies to today's China (see "sub-imperialism" below).

Nations and Empires

The terminology commonly used in reference to imperialism has for a long time rested on a strict dualism. (Mao's Three Worlds Theory might count as an exception but never had much resonance in anti-imperialist circles – and, for that matter, not even in Maoist ones.) The world is divided into two big camps. Lenin's distinction between "oppressor nations" and "oppressed nations" has been reproduced in numerous variations, whether it was juxtaposing the "First World" to the "Third World," the "metropolis" to the "periphery," or the "Global North" to the "Global South." Such a dualism can be useful for orientation, but, unsurprisingly, things are more complicated when you look at the details.

In their modern-day classic *Empire* (2000), Michael Hardt and Toni Negri proclaimed that "imperialism is over", citing the "declining sovereignty of nation-states" and "their increasing inability to regulate economic and cultural exchanges." Hardt and Negri contended that "we continually find the First World in the Third, the Third in the First, and the Second almost nowhere at all."

Well. First, imperialism is not dependent on the Three-World Model. Second, to suggest that economic power no longer has a lo-

a. **The European periphery**, which includes Western-oriented former Soviet republics (such as the Baltic states), former Warsaw Pact members (such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland), and former Yugoslav republics (such as Croatia and Slovenia), as well as Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, and Spain.

b. **Occupied territories of self-identified nations** (or including majority self-identified nations) within the Triad, such as the Basque Country, Catalonia, Corsica, Northern Ireland, Okinawa/Ryukyus, and Quebec. Exploitation is relative in these cases (people in Catalonia are economically better off than the people in most of Spain's other regions, etc.), and the strength of independence/secession movements varies largely. But due to these nations' lack of self-determination, they cannot be considered imperialist core.

C. Imperialist Dependency

The imperialist dependency consists of nations that serve specific roles in the imperialist system as cost-efficient production sites, suppliers of rare raw materials, tax havens, exclusive holiday destinations, or locations of military bases. They benefit from this, but their standing within the imperialist order is entirely conditional.

The imperialist dependency can be divided into four subcategories:

i. **The Gulf States** Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates.

ii. **The Asian Tigers** Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan. (The status of Hong Kong is difficult to assess since the territory's return to China in 1997.) These nations could also count as

b. **Nations that had no colonies of their own** (other than perhaps small overseas territories that mainly satisfied national prestige) but were intrinsically linked to colonial exploitation through Eurocentric and racist ideology, political alliance, and trade: Luxembourg, Norway, Switzerland, Sweden, and European micro-states such as Andorra, Monaco, and Liechtenstein.

c. **Former colonies with white settler populations** that acquired internal and external colonies of their own and became an integral part of the imperialist order of the Triad: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States of America.

d. **Israel is a special case.** It is a former colony turned settler nation, albeit not a white settler nation akin to the examples above. Israel is also a sub-imperialist power (see below) when considering its role in the Middle East. It is hugely dependent on the Triad for its survival, which is a characteristic of the nations of the imperialist dependency rather than the core. However, Israel's geopolitical role for the Triad is so important that its place in it seems firm and it can be considered part of the imperialist core.

B. Imperialist Periphery

The imperialist periphery consists of nations whose citizens profit from the imperialist order because of white supremacy, vicinity to core nations, political ties, and trade relations. However, these nations are exploited by the core nations and their standing within the imperialist nations is fragile.

The nations of the imperialist periphery can be divided into two subcategories:

cation and that the oppressors and the oppressed randomly mingle across the globe is false. No one who has ever been to both Paris and Niamey could seriously make such a claim, extreme expressions of poverty in Paris and of obscene wealth in Niamey notwithstanding. Third, nation states have lost neither their meaning nor their power in a globalized world. Neoliberalism might have pronounced the fact that nation states are not isolated and certain multinational corporations may have a frightening influence on international relations, but despite corporate power, free trade agreements, and international political bodies, nation states remain the key units of the global political order and the main actors in the administration of capital. Perhaps most importantly, they are central for the division of the world's riches. Citizenship is the single most important factor in deciding which share an individual can expect in the distribution of wealth and related privilege. And while the power of multinational corporations might extend to all corners of the earth, these corporations have much tighter relationships and shared interests with the ruling classes of certain nation states than with those of others. It is therefore not only legitimate but necessary to focus on nation states when sketching the imperialist order, and it is also important to consider nations without their own state, from First Nations on the American continent to Kurds and Basques. Nations are defined as peoples with a collective identity based on traits such as language, culture, and an intimate relationship to a certain territory.

Of course, the position of individuals within the imperialist order is not exclusively determined by citizenship, national affiliation, or place of residence. There are national bourgeoisies profiting from imperialism even in the poorest of countries; there are expatriate communities acting as agents of imperialism in oppressed nations; there are undocumented migrants in imperialist nations who do not benefit from the imperialist order; there is an urban-rural divide that needs to be accounted for; and there are millions of women who constitute what Maria Mies and others have called

the "last colony" in an imperialist system inseparable from patriarchal power. Any detailed study of imperialism's workings must consider this. Unfortunately, the task is beyond the scope of this paper, but I will return to some of the mentioned aspects in the concluding remarks on anti-imperialist practice.

Taxonomy

In the following sketch of a taxonomy of imperialism, I will use three main categories: imperialist nations, sub-imperialist nations, and oppressed nations. Each group will be divided into several subcategories. Certain nations straddle the boundaries of various categories. This seems inevitable given the generalizations required in a rough sketch such as this one.

I am not claiming that my categorizations of individual nations are superior to others, let alone the only ones possible. It is not a priority here to get every single categorization right. The goal is rather to help outline a framework that allows for meaningful collective categorization and, ultimately, well-informed anti-imperialist resistance.

1. Imperialist Nations

A. Imperialist Core

The imperialist core consists of those nations whose citizens profit from the imperialist system. Each nation has a class that profits from the imperialist system, but only the imperialist core nations can extend this privilege to its entire population. Imperialist core nations also run very little risk of being pushed to the margins of the imperialist order. Power balances between them can shift, but each of them is firmly entrenched in imperialist rule, due to a combination of economic, political, and military reasons;

key aspects (although not all of them need to be present in each imperialist core nation) are strong productive and finance capital, military prowess, racial privilege, advantageous geographical location, and a world language, preferably English, as the national language.

It is not necessary for imperialist core nations to have been colonial powers. Colonialism is a part of the imperialist project, but it is not a requirement for profiting from it. Imperialism is broader than colonialism. In fact, several former colonies (most notably, the United States of America) belong to the current imperialist core, while some former colonial powers (for example, Spain and Portugal) belong to the imperialist periphery.

It would also be a mistake to identify the imperialist core nations as those invited to powerful summits such as the G20. Some G20 nations are invited because they are important for the imperialist order (for example, India and Indonesia), not because they belong to the imperialist core.

Currently, the imperialist core consists of only one united bloc. In the case of strong rivalry and a relative balance of power, the imperialist core can split into different blocs. This was the case during the Cold War, when the U.S.-led imperialism of the Triad (North America, Western Europe, Japan) was challenged by the imperialism of the Soviet Union.

The imperialist core nations can be divided into four subcategories:

a. **The colonial powers**, that is, nations that controlled and exploited large territories under prolonged periods, thereby increasing their wealth and global influence: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Japan, and the Netherlands. Present-day Austria is a special case, still profiting from its former internal colonies, that is, the non-German-speaking parts of the Austrian Empire.