



## The Travesty of “Anti-Imperialism”<sup>1</sup>

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In the twentieth century the United States rose to become the leading imperialist power exercising hegemony over the world capitalist system, and became synonymous with both imperialism and capitalism.<sup>2</sup> Yet world capitalism and the international system through which it is organized, far from static, is in a constant state of development and change. Much of the left seems incapable of conceptualizing the transformation that have occurred in these recent decades of capitalist globalization, instead clinging tenaciously to an ossified formula of a singular U.S. empire, with

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<sup>2</sup> I cannot discuss the matter here, but the concept of imperialism as it is used by the vast majority is seriously problematic, insofar as it is based on a fetishism of territory or geography. Imperialism has always been a violent class relation as developed through a world economy politically divided into national jurisdictions. The reality of global capitalism as a new epoch in the ongoing and open-ended history of capitalism characterized by the transnational integration of the leading heights of national capital and the integration of every country into a globally-integrated system of production, finance, and services, compels us to shed this territorial fetish and return to a conception of imperialism as a transnational class relation. Moreover, many forget that imperialism is in the first instance an economic movement facilitated politically and/or militarily. The economic in this age of globalized capitalism is anything but national. If imperialism is to have any meaning it cannot be seen as nation against nation.



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the Triad countries in tow and the rest of the world victims of this empire. In this formula anything that seems to challenge the Sole Enemy is seen as progressive, part of a just struggle of the oppressed, and deserving of support. As a result, a self-declared “anti-imperialist” left condemns capitalist exploitation and repression around the world when it is practiced by the United States and other Western powers or the governments they support, yet turns a blind eye to, or even defends, repressive, authoritarian, and dictatorial states simply because these states face hostility from Washington. There are two stories here. One involves a political critique of this “anti-imperialism” logic. The other is how concepts and practices historically part of the left and progressive social change agendas—solidarity, sovereignty, and proletarian internationalism—have been redefined to justify exploitation and repression.

The politics of capitalist exploitation and social control around the world are fundamentally shaped by the contradiction between a globally-integrated economy and a nation-state-based system of political domination. Economic globalization and the transnational integration of capitals provide a centripetal impulse to global capitalism, whereas political fragmentation gives a powerful centrifugal counterimpulse that is resulting in an escalation of geopolitical conflict. The chasm is rapidly widening between the economic unity of global capital and political competition among ruling groups who must achieve legitimacy and keep the internal social order of their respective nations from fracturing in the face of the escalating crisis of global capitalism. States attempt to shift the burden of the crisis onto the working and popular classes, as governments turn to more repressive, authoritarian, and even fascist forms of rule, and to diverse ideological and rhetorical devices, in order to contain mass unrest. The effort requires sublimating and externalizing social and political tensions onto vulnerable groups or external enemies that may be conjured up when none exist, onto political rivals, and to more peripheral regions. The more powerful a state the more advantage it has in these efforts.

This global conjuncture is the backdrop to a contemporary “socialism of fools.”<sup>3</sup> I will discuss here the cases of China, Nicaragua, the BRICS, and multipolarity as they bring out the convoluted logic and retrograde politics of the “anti-imperialist” left.

### **China and Capitalist Development**

China now has, by a longshot, more billionaires than the United States: 969 to 691 (Global Times 2023). Inequality surpassed that of the United States by a large margin a decade ago and the country is now one of the most unequal in the world (Yu and Zhou 2014). Capitalism with Chinese characteristics has involved the rise of powerful Chinese transnational capitalists fused with a state-party elite dependent on the reproduction of capital and high-consumption middle strata, fueled by a devastating wave of primitive accumulation in the countryside and the exploitation of hundreds of millions of Chinese workers (see, inter-alia, Xu 2018). Marx had defined socialism as

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<sup>3</sup> This is in reference to the German socialism August Bebel, who once commented that antisemitism is the “socialism of fools” because the antisemites recognized capitalist exploitation only if the exploiter happened to be Jewish but who would otherwise turn a blind eye to exploitation emanating from other quarters (as cited in Wein 2022).

the emancipatory self-activity of the workers; yet strikes and independent unions are not legal in China. The Chinese Communist Party has long since abandoned any talk of class struggle or workers' power. As labor struggles continue to escalate in the country so too does state repression of them (see, *inter-alia*, Barbieri 2022; Elfstrom 2022; China Labor Bulletin n.d.).

It is true that capitalist development in China has lifted millions out of extreme poverty—at least according to the narrow World Bank measurements of poverty as below \$785 in annual income—even as the “iron rice bowl” that guaranteed lifetime employment and welfare was abandoned three decades ago. This development has brought about rapid industrialization, technological progress, and advanced infrastructure. It is equally true that the North American and Western European core countries experienced these achievements during their periods of rapid capitalist development from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. The left never saw this capitalist development in the West as a victory for the working class nor did it lose sight of the link between this development, the law of combined and uneven accumulation in the larger world capitalist system, and plunder abroad that made this development possible. China is now “catching up.” If colonial conquest and the transfer of surplus back to the traditional core played a major role in raising living standards in the West, the Chinese revolution of 1949, with its destruction of the atavistic classes, made possible rapid capitalist development once China opened up in the 1980s.

The Chinese state capitalist model rests on a complex of state-private companies in which private capital accounts for three fifths of output and four fifths of urban employment (Bradsher 2022). China may represent the future not of “socialism” but of global capitalism. China has not followed the neo-liberal route to transnational capitalist integration—the state plays a key role in the financial system, in regulating private capital, in massive public expenditure, especially in infrastructure, and in planning. This has allowed it to develop twenty-first century infrastructure, to undertake cutting edge Research and Development, and to guide capital accumulation into aims broader than that of immediate profit making. This may be a distinct model of capitalist development from the Western neoliberal variant but it still obeys the laws of capital accumulation. Following the opening to global capitalism in the 1980s, China became a market for transnational corporations and a sink for surplus accumulated capital able to take advantage of a vast supply of cheap labor controlled by a repressive, omnipresent surveillance state. But by the turn of the century pressures were building up to find outlets abroad for surplus Chinese capital accumulated during years of hothouse capitalist development.

Sustaining this development in China now became dependent on the export of capital abroad, not unlike how overaccumulated capital in Europe turned to a fresh round of imperialism in the late nineteenth century in order to open up new outlets for unloading surplus and for procuring raw materials, labor, and markets. China and other states in the former Third World do not need to undertake colonial conquest at this time in order to export capital, exploit labor, and access markets abroad, as the task of violently integrating all countries into world capitalism was already accomplished by the West in previous centuries. In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, China led the world in a surge of outward foreign direct investment (FDI) to countries in the global

South and North alike, deepening transnational integration and accelerating capitalist transformation. Between 1991 and 2003, China’s FDI increased 10 fold, and then increased 13.7 times from 2004 to 2013, from \$45 billion to \$613 billion (Zhou and Leung 2015). By 2015 China had become the third largest foreign investor in the world (Garcia-Herrero, Zia, and Casanova 2015). Its outbound FDI began to exceed inbound FDI and the country became a net creditor. What happens when this Chinese outward FDI touches down in the former Third World?

### **Displacement and Extraction Become “South-South Cooperation”**

The indigenous communities of the Peruvian highland province of Apurímac have waged bloody struggles in recent years against the Las Bambas open-pit copper mine, one of the largest in the world, that have left scores dead and injured. The mine has been owned and operated since 2014 by the Chinese state-private transnational mining conglomerate MMG (the 25 percent that is private includes global investor groups). In 2022 the government approved the mine’s expansion, violently evicting indigenous communities that had blocked roads and camped on mine property. In fact, the Peruvian state legally sells policing services to mining companies, enabling MMG to purchase physical force from the police to advance copper extraction by violent means (for a summary, see Rodríguez 2022)

While this Sino-Peruvian extractive space and others like it are touted by the Chinese as models of South-South cooperation and post-Western modernization, keen observers will recognize at once the classical structure of imperialist extraction, whereby transnational capital displaces communities and appropriates resources under the political and military protection of local states tasked with the violent repression of resistance to expulsion and exploitation. But because investors are (mostly) Chinese, not Western, they escape condemnation by the “anti-imperialist” left that has historically been trained to recognize such actions as imperialism only when carried out by Western states.

Extractive activity by transnational capital requires logistical infrastructure such as roads, railroads, ports, and dams for the supply of energy. There is a well-known history of World Bank and other Western finance for megaprojects that facilitate the inward penetration of transnational capital, the extraction of raw materials and industrial goods, the opening up of markets, and the global movement of capital and profits. Dependency theorist André Gunder Frank noted long ago how value first extracted in hinterlands pass through scalar networks that serve as arteries for the progressive movement of these values from more peripheral to more core regions and groups within and among countries (Frank 1967). Alongside MMG and other Chinese mining and industrial transnationals, the Chinese state-owned conglomerate Cosco Shipping Holdings, in collaboration with the Swiss-based company Glencore, is building a megaport and industrial zone on the Peruvian coast along with railroads leading inland to agro-industrial and mining zones, part of China’s Belt and Roads initiative, a global infrastructure plan to open up markets and boost international trade and investment routes. As with Las Bambas, local communities in Chancay, 50

miles north of Peru's capital, Lima, have been battling takeover by private companies, displacement and environmental destruction (Zea 2022).

The pattern is the same throughout Latin America. Workers, peasants, and indigenous communities have no say whatsoever in these projects; they are decided on and imposed by local states in collusion with transnational capital. Chinese banks have given out more than \$137 billion in loans to finance infrastructure, energy, and mining projects in the region. One 2022 report by a coalition of environmental and human rights groups in Latin America looked at 26 projects in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela. It found widespread violations of human rights, the displacement of local communities, environmental devastation, and violent conflict wherever Chinese investment in mines and megaprojects took place.<sup>4</sup> Defenders of loan practices by China claim that these loans are different from those coming from the West because they do not impose conditionality in the way that Western lenders do. This is not entirely true.<sup>5</sup> But even if it were, what difference does that make for workers and peasants resisting the exploitation, repression, and environmental destruction associated with Chinese investments in collaboration with transnational investors from elsewhere and local capitalist states?

The point is not that Chinese capital is worse or better than capital originating from other countries. Capital is capital irrespective of the national identity or ethnicity of its bearers. However, when a Western capitalist state and a capitalist state in the global South cooperate to impose megaprojects on local communities or to facilitate transnational corporate plunder in extraction or industry, this is condemned as exploitation by imperialism and local ruling classes. When two capitalist states from the global South cooperate for the same megaprojects and corporate exploitation, this is praised as progressive, anti-imperialist "South-South cooperation" and "bringing development." Yet proletarian internationalism calls on us to support the struggle of working and popular classes against the control and exploitation by capital irrespective of the nationality of capital.

Capitalist development is not a class-neutral process. It is by definition a class project of the bourgeoisie. One may argue that development must still take place even if it is capitalist and that such infrastructure is necessary for development. But then, why not applaud the megaprojects,

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<sup>4</sup> A handful of examples are: In Colombia, six members of the Rios Vivos Movement were kidnapped and tortured for opposing the Chinese-financed Hidroituango hydroelectric dam. In Ecuador, indigenous leader José Tendetza was murdered after speaking out against the Chinese Mirador open-pit mine. In Mexico, the Chinese-built, military-run Maya Train project, which will cater to international tourists, has resulted in the destruction of local farming communities, mass displacement, and widespread violent repression of resistance (See CICDHA 2022). On the Maya Train project, see Morris (2023).

<sup>5</sup> Chinese loan contracts contained special confidentiality clauses and ensure repayment priority over other creditors. According to a recent study of 100 Chinese loan contracts, many loans have inbuilt collateral mechanisms, such as Chinese-controlled revenue accounts, in which profits from the sale of commodities by a debtor are deposited in an account controlled by Beijing and serve as collateral for the loan. In one example among many, a 2010 loan to Ecuador, in addition to the depositor account controlled by Beijing, constrained Ecuador's ability to adopt domestic policies that could negatively impact Chinese interest (see Wintgens 2023).

extractivism, and maquiladoras coming from Western capitalists and states? Are we really to believe that Chinese investors are rapidly setting up export-processing zones and relocating labor-intensive industrial production from China to lower-wage zones in Ethiopia, Vietnam, and elsewhere, not to make profit but to “help these countries develop”? Is that not the same legitimating discourse as the World Bank?

Such outfits as the Tricontinental, headed by Vijay Prashad,<sup>6</sup> consistently gush praise on this Chinese role in the former Third World as “mutually beneficial,” “helping development,” and a “win-win” for China and the countries its corporations invest in (see, *inter-alia*, Ross and Prashad 2021). Parroting the legitimating discourse of the Chinese state-party elite, the Tricontinental has also insisted that “the peaceful rise of socialism with Chinese characteristics” provides an alternative to Western imperialism (Opuku et al. 2023). Well, it does. But not an alternative to capitalist dispossession and exploitation. Capitalist development, whether from the West or the East, is about expanding the frontiers of accumulation. Those who cheerlead China remain silent on two counts—one on the Chinese state’s defense of capital and repression of the Chinese working class inside the country, and the other on its capitalist exploitation abroad.

### **The Misuse of Sovereignty and Solidarity**

The “anti-imperialist” left rightfully decries Western propaganda, but seems incapable of calling out or even recognizing non-Western propaganda around the world; or worse yet, they parrot that same propaganda. Sometimes the slightest rhetorical “anti-imperialist” flush from a country’s head of state—often directed at maintaining an internal base of support—will whip the myopic into action in defense of a state independent of the nature of the regime in question. Nicaragua provides a textbook case. The Ortega regime has proved remarkably adroit at using radical-sounding language and anti-imperialist rhetoric to strike a reflexive chord of support among the international left. Yet there is an utter non-correspondence between this rhetoric and the reality in the country (for details and sources on the Nicaraguan case, see Robinson 2022).

Ortega returned to power in 2007 through a pact with the country’s traditional right-wing oligarchy, the former members of the armed counterrevolution (known as the *contras*), and the conservative Catholic Church hierarchy and Evangelical sects. Promising absolute respect for private property and unrestricted freedom for capital, he then proceeded to co-govern with the capitalist class, granting transnational capital 10-year across the board tax holidays, deregulation, unrestricted freedom to repatriate profits, neoliberal policies, and repression of striking workers and peasants. Banking, agriculture, industry, imports, and exports are all controlled by local and transnational capitalist conglomerates (96 percent of the country’s property remains in the hands of the private sector). The dictatorship has repressed all dissent and shut down over 3,500 civil

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<sup>6</sup> Prashad appears to be politically compromised. He has received over \$14 million from a secretive American tech billionaire, Neville Roy Singham, who has close ties to China and has served as a consultant to the Chinese telecommunications company Huawei. These funds were channeled through Goldman Sachs Philanthropy Fund. (See, *inter-alia*, Reid Ross and Dobson 2022, Bredderman 2023).

society organizations—this in a country of barely six million people—because it considers *any* civic life outside of its own to be a threat.

Many progressives may be genuinely confused because of the well-deserved support that the 1979–1990 Sandinista revolution marshalled around the world and the history of brutal U.S. intervention in that country. That revolution died in 1990 and what came to power in 2007 under Ortega was anything but revolution. Yet the “anti-imperialist” left has chosen to warmly embrace the dictatorship, justified by alleged U.S. attempts to destabilize the regime and in the name of “sovereignty.” But the evidence does not support the claim made by these detractors that the United States is pushing “counterrevolutionary regime change” against Ortega, notwithstanding Washington’s saber-rattling rhetoric.

Nicaragua does not face trade or investment sanctions.<sup>7</sup> The United States is the country’s principal trading partner—bilateral trade surpassed \$8.3 billion in 2022 (United States Census) — and transnational corporate investment continues to pour in, as does multilateral lending to the Central Bank (following a January 2023 visit to the country, the IMF reiterated its longstanding praise for the government’s neoliberal policies [IMF 2023]). There is no military or paramilitary aggression. In fact, until 2018 Washington routinely commended Ortega for his close cooperation with the U.S. Southern Command, the Drug Enforcement Agency, and U.S. immigration policy. Yet none of these facts stopped the U.S.-based organization Code Pink, among others, from claiming that Ortega’s is a “socialist government” under pressure from “devastating sanctions” and facing “violent attempted coups” (Code Pink n.d.).

The claim by the “anti-imperialists” to be defending Nicaragua’s sovereignty rings utterly hollow, considering that Ortega is responsible for the single biggest giveaway of sovereignty in the country’s history when in 2013 it granted a concession to the Hong Kong-based company HKND, headed by the Chinese billionaire Wang Jing, to build and run a canal from the country’s Caribbean to Pacific coast. Law 480 authorized HKND exclusive concessions for 50 years and the option to extend it for another 50 years. It included a concession for carrying out seven subprojects; among them ports, oil pipelines, free-trade zones, and tourist areas that could be carried out in any part of the national territory under the control of the concessionaire. Although construction of the canal has yet to commence because of HKND’s financial problems, the project has already resulted in vast land expropriations and the estimates of those who would be displaced should the project proceed run up to 100,000.

Washington does wage full-blown destabilization campaigns against Iran, Venezuela, and other countries. Such crimes must be vehemently condemned by any leftist worthy of the name. But this does not absolve the left of its ethical and political commitment to internationalism and

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<sup>7</sup> There are individual sanctions leveled on the private bank accounts and properties that several dozen top Orteguistas hold in the United States. While one may condemn Washington, as I do, for unilaterally arrogating to itself the right to impose sanctions on foreign individuals or countries, we would have to ask why supposed socialist revolutionaries have millions of dollars in personal assets tucked away in the United States. More to the point, the United States imposes the same individual sanctions of politicians and businessmen from many countries supported by Washington, such as neighboring Guatemala, so clearly such sanctions do not necessarily point to “regime change operations.”

solidarity with those oppressed just because we resist U.S. imperial pretensions around the world. The “anti-imperialist” left, however, will tell you otherwise. Heed the warning by journalist Caitlin Johnstone: if you live in a Western country “it is simply is not possible for you to lend your voice to the cause of protesters in empire-targeted nations without facilitating the empire’s propaganda campaigns about those protests. You either have a responsible relationship with this reality or an irresponsible one” (Johnstone 2022). Simple as that. Proletarians of just some countries unite!

Sovereignty originally referred to the total domination of a supreme authority, derived from the Roman *summum imperium* (the highest authority) and *merum imperium* (unqualified authority). This conception reached its apogee in the age of European absolutism and in pre-capitalist dynastic and imperial systems around the world. The French Revolution counterposed the supreme power of states to the bourgeois conception of the “general will,” followed later by that of “popular sovereignty” as the principle of democratic control by the people along with the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states, this latter falsely credited to the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia (on this myth, see Osiander 2001).<sup>8</sup>

While we can appreciate how the institutions of bourgeois democracy help to secure the illusion of consent under the cloak of hegemony, the dimwitted seem to have reverted to the conception of absolute sovereignty, *not* of the people or the working classes, but of the rulers in countries that the “anti-imperialists” defend. Not the sovereignty of the Nicaraguan people but the absolute sovereignty of the Ortega dictatorship. Not the sovereignty of the Chinese people but the absolute sovereignty of the Chinese state and Community Party. This confusion of the sovereignty of nations and peoples with that of states was brought home in one recent article by Alex Rubinstein, a writer for the *Grayzone*. The United States, he contended, was intervening in Syria to lay claim to Syrian oil. This contention was followed by a woefully revealing political Freudian slip: Syrian oil “rightfully belongs to the sovereign government of Syria” (Rubinstein 2021).<sup>9</sup>

Anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles in the twentieth century defended *national—not state*—sovereignty in the face of interference by the colonial and imperial powers. Capitalist states use this claim to sovereignty as a “right” to exploit and oppress inside national borders free from outside interference. The systematic violation of human rights is not covered by the principle in international law of nonintervention in the internal affairs of nations. We on the left have no qualms about “violating national sovereignty” to condemn human rights abuses by pro-Western regimes, and nor should we in defense of human rights in those regimes not favored by Washington.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> As capitalism developed, notes international relations scholar Hilbourne Watson, a transition occurred from the “religious-monarchical principle [of sovereignty] to a popular-territorial conception, in which territory became inseparable from the people perceived as the popular sovereign” (Watson 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Such reasoning has led Leila Al-Shami to conclude, in reference to the “Hands off Syria” coalition, that “‘Hands off Syria’ really means ‘Hands off Assad.’” (Al-Shami 2018)

<sup>10</sup> In any event, although this is discussion for elsewhere, capitalist property relations make popular sovereignty impossible unless it is exercised through a *struggle against capital*. The state mediates capital accumulation as a global process that weaves in and out of particular national jurisdictions. When states deploy their sovereign power to protect capital they are defending a juridical (property) relation not in fact tethered to territory. The prevailing sovereign in

Proletarian internationalism calls on the working and oppressed classes of one country to extend solidarity not to states but to the struggles of the working and oppressed classes of other countries. For the “anti-imperialists,” if you are oppressed and exploited by a government that the Washington backs then your struggle is worthy of support; otherwise, you are a lackey of imperialism. States deserve the left’s support to the extent—and only to the extent—that they advance the emancipatory struggles of the popular and working classes, that they advance, or are forced to advance, policies that favor these classes. The “anti-imperialists” conflate state with nation, country, and people, generally lacking any theoretical conception of these categories and advancing a populist over a class political orientation. We on the left condemned the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq earlier this century. We did so not because we supported the Saddam Hussein regime—only a fool could have—but because we stood in solidarity with the Iraqi people and because the whole imperial project for the Middle East was tantamount to an attack on the poor and the oppressed everywhere.

### **BRICS: Replacing the Capital-Labor Contradiction with a North-South Contradiction**

The “anti-imperialists” cheer on the BRICS bloc of nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) as a Southern challenge to global capitalism; a progressive, even anti-imperialist option for humanity. They can only make such a claim by reducing capitalism and imperialism to Western supremacy in the international system (Desai 2013). In this realist worldview, the struggle of workers and the oppressed is here transmuted into the struggle among capitalist states for political hegemony in interstate relations.

In the heyday of colonialism and its immediate aftermath local ruling classes in the former Third World were, at best, anti-imperialist but not anti-capitalist. Their nationalism obliterated class by proclaiming an identity of interests among the citizens of a particular country. This nationalism had a progressive and sometimes even radical edge to it so far as all members of the country in question were oppressed by colonial domination, the caste systems it imposed, and the suppression of indigenous capital. Today’s “anti-imperialists” wax enthusiasm for the BRICS as a revived “Third World Project,” in the words of Prashad, as little more than antiquated nostalgia for that anti-colonial moment of the mid-twentieth century. Two references will suffice to illustrate just how out of touch such thinking is with the twenty-first century reality.

A number of years ago I had the opportunity to give a talk in Manila to a group of Philippine revolutionary activists. One woman in attendance, originally from India, objected to my analysis of the rise of a transnational capitalist class that incorporated powerful contingents from the former Third World. Visibly disturbed, she told me that in India “we are fighting against imperialism and for national liberation, just as Lenin had analyzed.” I asked her what she meant by this. The core countries were exploiting Indian workers and transferring the surplus back to the imperialist

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this age of global capitalism is transnational capital. So long as a state defends capitalist class relations against challenges to them, the only “right” they are defending is the right to exploit.

countries, she replied. It was by sheer coincidence that in the very week of my talk, the Indian-based global corporate conglomerate, the Tata Group, which operates in over 100 countries in six continents, had acquired a string of corporate icons of its former British colonial master, among them, Land Rover, Jaguar, Tetley Tea, British Steel, and Tesco supermarkets, making Tata the single largest employer *inside* the United Kingdom. So, India-based capitalists had become the largest single exploiter of British workers. According to this woman’s own outdated logic, the United Kingdom was now the victim of Indian imperialism!

Meanwhile, shortly after his first inauguration, in 2003, and then again in 2010 during his second presidential term, Brazilian President Lula loaded up a government aircraft with Brazilian corporate executives and headed for Africa. The presidential-corporate entourage lobbied Mozambique and other African countries to open up to investment in the continent’s abundant mineral resources by the Brazilian-based transnational mining corporation, Vale, under the rhetoric of “South-South solidarity” (Aguiar 2023). It is unclear what was anti-imperialist, much less anti-capitalist, about Lula’s African corporate safaris, and by extension the “South-South cooperation” agenda it epitomizes; or why the left should be applauding the expansion of Brazilian-based capital into Africa, Chinese-based capital into Latin America, Russian-based capital into Central Asia, or Indian-based capital into the United Kingdom.

As Franz Fanon famously noted in *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon 1965), the national bourgeoisies of the former Third World were born decadent and treacherous. Far from challenging these bourgeoisies, the BRICS governments facilitate the expansion of transnational capital and the ongoing integration of “their” national bourgeoisies into now globalized circuits of accumulation. It is therefore not just that the leading capitalist strata from the historic periphery have transnationalized across the South and the North, but in doing so, they have integrated into a global ruling class that exercises its power over the laboring masses in *both* South *and* North. The principal contradiction worldwide now is between global capital and global labor. The romantic yearning for a new Third World project obscures internal class contradictions along with the web of transnational class relations into which they are enmeshed.

We may support the (mildly) redistributive policies at home and dynamic foreign policy abroad of governments such as Lula’s. All capitalist states are not the same and it matters a great deal who is in the government. But a “progressive” government is not a socialist or necessarily an anti-imperialist government. For the myopic, the outward expansion of Chinese, Indian, or Brazilian-based capital is seen as some sort of liberation from imperialism. What is one to make of the bizarre claim by the Canadian-based “anti-imperialist” Geopolitical Economy Research Group and the International Manifesto Group that it sponsors, for whom ideological commitment trumps facts, that the BRICS are “among the better-known successes” in efforts to promote “autonomous and egalitarian national development and industrialization to break imperialist shackles” (International Manifesto Group 2021)?

If the BRICS do not represent an alternative to global capitalism and the domination of transnational capital, they *do* signal the shift towards a more multipolar and balanced *inter-state* system *within* the global capitalist order. But such a multipolar inter-state system remains part of

a brutal, exploitative, global capitalist world in which the BRICS capitalists and states are as much committed to control and exploitation of the global working and popular classes as are their Northern counterparts. As the BRICS membership expands, new candidates in 2023 to join the bloc include such magnificently “autonomous and egalitarian” states fighting “imperialist shackles” as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Kazakhstan.

### **Multipolarity: The New Albatross**

The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and the West’s radical political, military and economic response to it may signal the *coup de grace* of a decadent post-World War II international order. The prevailing distribution of formal decision-making power among states in this post-War order does not reflect radical changes in recent decades in the relative weight of states in the international system. An ever-more integrated global capitalism is inconsistent with a U.S.- and Western-controlled international political order and financial architecture, with an exclusively dollar denominated global economy. We are at the onset of a radical reconfiguration of global geopolitical alignments to the drumbeat of escalating economic turbulence and political chaos. Yet the crisis of hegemony in the international order takes place within this single, integrated global economy.

The emerging global capitalist pluralism may offer greater maneuvering room for popular struggles around the world but a politically multipolar world does not mean that emerging poles of global capitalism are any less exploitative or oppressive than the established centers. The limits to this maneuvering room were made clear in the May 2023 announcement by the Russian magnate Boris Titov, who heads the Russia-Cuba Business Council, that Russian capitalists would invest in Cuba thanks to generous concessions, including 30-year land concessions, tax exemptions on machinery imports, and the repatriation of profits. However, as part of any investment deal, explained Titov,

we would like to see new measures as well. The issue of tax preferences, an independent personnel policy of Russian employers in Cuba, including the right to freely hire and dismiss employees [that is, a capitalist labor market with no state protection], and preferential access of Russian companies to public procurement [of state contracts]. We hope that in the near future...the whole range of preferences will be enshrined into law. (Martín 2023)

To the contrary, the established West and the emerging centers in this polycentric world are converging around remarkably similar “Great Power” tropes, especially jingoistic—often ethnic—nationalism and nostalgia for a mythologized “glorious civilization” that must now be rejuvenated. The Spenglerian narratives differ from one country to another according to particular histories and cultures. In China hyper-nationalism combines with Confucian obedience to authority, Han ethnic supremacy, and a new Long March to recover great power status. For Putin it is the glory days of a “Great Russia” empire anchored in Eurasia, politically propped up by extreme patriarchal conservatism that Putin calls “traditional spiritual and moral values” embodying the “spiritual

essence of the Russian nation over the decaying West.” In the United States it is the hyper-imperial bravado of a waning Pax Americana legitimated by the doctrine of “U.S. exceptionalism” and the bombast of “democracy and freedom,” at whose fringe has always been white supremacy, now incarnated in a rising fascist movement as “replacement theory.” To these we could add pan-Turkism, Hindu nationalism, and other such quasi-fascist ideologies in this rising polycentric world. Make America Great Again! Make China Great Again! Make Russia Great Again!

The United States may be the top dog and the most dangerous criminal among competing cartels of criminal states. We must condemn Washington for instigating a New Cold War and for prodding Russia through aggressive NATO expansion into invading Ukraine. Yet the “anti-imperialist” left insists that there is one Single Enemy, the United States and its allies. This is a Manichean tale of “the West and the rest.” Such a metaphysical Star Wars narrative about the virtuous fight against the singular Evil Empire ends up legitimating the Russian invasion of the Ukraine, as if one crime justifies another. And just as Star Wars, it becomes hard to distinguish the fantastical babble of a fantasy world from the babble of the “anti-imperialist” left.

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