

Imperialism

Concept: Imperialism

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Description Imperialism is a widely-used term which has undergone several semantic transformations. The realities it is intended to express have changed over time. As a concept, it is at the same time descriptive and politically charged. In common usage imperialism is synonymous with domination, subjugation, or the exercise of control by coercion. It is etymologically connected with the idea of empire or imperium. It has a strong association with notions of power and the use of power. It represents both hegemony, in all its forms, as an actual state and the striving for the imposition of hegemony. It is the antithesis of autonomy, however defined. This article deals with the term and its usage, not the history of imperialism as a phenomenon.

The most appropriate manner of examining the concept of imperialism is to focus on the historical roots of its various meanings. Empire is an ancient form of rule based on the extension of the formal authority of a state and involving loss of sovereignty for neighbouring states or the annexation of territories outside state control. Empires have existed for millennia and imperialism as a mode of governing appeared long ago. They were concomitant with the appearance of states as forms of human organization. From the remotest past and in all parts of the globe, powerful states tended to turn into empires. From ancient Egypt to the Sumerian, Babylonian and Assyrian Empires in Mesopotamia, from the Gupta and Mogul Empires in India to the Chou, Ch'in, Han, Sui, T'ang, Sung, Ming and Ch'ing dynasties in China, from the Macedonian to the Roman and Byzantine Empires, from the Umayyad, Abbasid and Fatimid Empires of central Islam to the Ottoman Empire, and so on, the phenomenon was universal. As a testimony to their ambitious view of their *raison d'être*, many claimed to be world empires. Although their universal pretensions faded, some empires continued their existence into the twentieth century. The Russian, Habsburg (Austria) and Ottoman Empires came apart only during the World War I.

A second understanding of the term imperialism relates to the nature of the political order inside a state. An empire was a type of regime or a system of government in which the head of state was an emperor, rather than a king, a president, or another sort of official. The Roman Empire, the Holy Roman Empire and the Napoleonic Empire were cases in point. The substantive or adjective "imperialist" referred to a supporter or advocate of the emperor, the empire he ruled or imperial rule in general. It was a neutral term. In 1836, "impérialisme" made its way in a supplement to the 1835 (sixth) edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, and was defined as

"the system, opinion, or doctrine of imperialists." In France, negative connotations were never absent, especially since this understanding of imperialism came to be personified by Napoleon I and Napoleon III. Caesarism, associated with despotism and militarism, merged into a new term, "bonapartism." Both Napoleons cast their shadow over Britain where the proclamation of Queen Victoria as Empress of India in 1877 and Disraeli's quest for imperial possessions overseas were denounced by liberals as military adventurism, political demagoguery, and nascent authoritarian rule.

As the rush to acquire colonies, protectorates, and spheres of influence gathered force at the end of the nineteenth century, colonial powers took to referring to themselves as empires. Imperialism became synonymous with colonial expansion and colonial rule over non-European peoples. In fact the use of the term imperialism to describe colonial expansion predated the emergence of the term colonialism. In the British experience, the concept of empire had an added meaning, that of an association of white Anglo-Saxons spreading over all areas of the globe, yet united by kinship and pride, and remaining part of Greater Britain. White settler-colonies were destined to become self-governing dominions united with England in a relationship of equality. Overall, however, the British Empire was non-European, with Indians alone making up the vast majority of its population.

One consequence of the recourse to the word "imperialism" to characterize colonial expansion was the addition of an economic dimension to the notion of imperialism. Imperialism was no longer solely a political reality; it now conveyed the idea of the search for the economic advantages that lay at the heart of the colonial process. The word and the reality of what imperialism was supposed to represent became more controversial than ever. The colonial system had proponents until decolonization in the second half of the twentieth century made empires defunct. Liberals admitted that imperial rule was no longer acceptable and, in the wake of decolonization, considered that imperialism belonged to the past.

Critics associated with the socialist left took a different direction. While ideologues of imperialism — in the sense of colonial expansion — stressed the economic gains to be made from the possession of colonies, critics interrogated and fought against the forms of exploitation that made these "gains" possible. Their root-and-branch critique of imperialism gradually became the only analytical tools available to comprehend this phenomenon, as liberals either left the field, downplayed the economic content of imperialism, or confined themselves to contesting prevailing interpretations. The term imperialism went out of liberal vocabulary at the same pace it entered left-wing discourse, so much so that its use became a telltale indicator of one's position on the political spectrum. The essence of the left-wing interpretation of imperialism lies in the link it establishes between imperialism and capitalism. It is the touchstone of the "economic theory of imperialism," a theme around which an immense literature

developed.

Coupled with the colonial clash at Fashoda (1898) which brought Britain and France to the brink of war and the Spanish-American war of 1898, the Boer War (1899-1902) was in many respects a turning point in the history of the word imperialism. The burning of Boer farms by the British army and the transfer of Boers to concentration camps tarnished Britain's reputation and put eulogists of imperialism on the defensive. The war correspondent John A. Hobson returned home to write *Imperialism, a Study* (1902), a methodical attempt to demonstrate that imperialism was a systemic corollary of the functioning of the capitalist economy. Hobson drew attention to the relationship between the export of capital and colonial expansion. He observed how capital migrated abroad in search of opportunities for profitable investment. It did so for lack of adequate investment venues at home. The domestic economy was constrained by artificially narrow markets as a result of the low purchasing power of British workers. An unequal distribution of wealth was the engine driving capital abroad; it lay at the core of imperialist expansionism. As a consequence, imperialism was less a fortuitous policy than a logical outgrowth of an economic and political structure. To render it superfluous, social reform and redistribution of national income were requisite. Hobson had deep and lasting influence on subsequent thinking about imperialism.

Marxist writers then entered the fray. Their impact on theorizing about imperialism was such that the subject practically became a hallmark of the Marxist tradition. Rudolf Hilferding's *Finance Capital* (1910) drew attention to the phenomenon of business concentration, giving rise to finance capital, a new type of capital resulting from the merger of bank capital and industrial capital, under the aegis of the former. Concentration and monopoly tended to lower the average rate of profit, leading to the search for foreign outlets for investment purposes and to conquest abroad. In the *Accumulation of Capital* (1913), Rosa Luxemburg pointed to the limits imposed by capitalist exploitation on the growth of internal markets, forcing capitalism to intensify the search for new markets in the colonial world. Nicolai Bukharin's *The World Economy and Imperialism, an Economic Outline* (1915, expanded in 1917) highlighted the role of state power in the formation of finance capital and in the ensuing process of imperialist expansionism and war. The most influential study of all was Lenin's *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism, a Popular Outline* (1916). Synthesizing Hobson's and Hilferding's contributions, Lenin sharpened their edge, stressing imperialism's inherent tendency toward wars for hegemony and positing its status as capitalism's final epoch before the advent of socialism.

The Marxist tradition produced the conceptual instruments which laid the ground for the detachment of imperialism from its colonial background. Capitalist expansion was no longer limited to the acquisition of colonial empires. Capital could be exported to sovereign states, reducing them to a dependent or semi-colonial position, despite the outward trappings of

independence. Imperialism was forcible capitalist expansion; colonial empires were only one form. For left-wing writers in general, decolonization and the fall of the colonial system in no way ended imperialism. The "dependency school" which emerged after 1945 emphasized the character of imperialism as a structure or system encompassing the entire world, with hegemonic powers in the centre and dependent countries in the periphery. "Neo-colonialism" was the continuance of quasi-colonial domination after independence.

This view is rejected outright by liberal authors, for whom imperialism was a colonial policy resulting mostly from non-economic (e.g., political, diplomatic, strategic, or nationalist) motivations and not a product of capitalism. In *The Sociology of Imperialism* (1919), Joseph Schumpeter even claimed that capitalism was anti-imperialist and attributed imperialist expansion to atavisms and remnants of pre-capitalist attitudes. As for Raymond Aron, he argued in *Paix et Guerres entre les Nations* (1962) that expansion occurred for its own sake. It was a natural tendency of states and statesmen, a function of the calculus of power rather than a response to economic stimuli.

The terms imperialism, dependency, and neo-colonialism were much in use until the late 1970s as concepts conveying the idea of persistent control by advanced capitalist societies of apparently independent developing countries in various areas, political, military, economic, and cultural. They faded as left-wing and pro-Third World currents receded in the face of the neo-liberal offensive of the 1980s which touted globalization as a sufficient explanation, an accomplished fact, an inevitable outcome and a desirable aspiration. Although globalization and imperialism are conceptually distinct, in practice the principle of globality underlying globalization puts the world at the disposal of those possessing the means to control it. Globalizing impulses tend to originate in advanced capitalist countries, while those being globalized tend to be elsewhere. The pattern is so reminiscent of imperialism that globalization is viewed in many parts of the world as the current face of imperialism, and Empires as the harbingers of globalization. The concept of imperialism is back in the fore, thanks to the process of globalization which had apparently replaced it. The fact that neo-conservatives in command in the United States are intent on reviving imperial rule, protectorates, and mandates in all but name as their preferred system of international governance further underlines the relevance of the concept of imperialism as an analytical tool.