

Grasping global imperialism at the root

Our anti-imperialism must be anti-capitalist to the core

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On October 4, 2019, four months into the largest mass uprising in Hong Kong history, Chief Executive of Hong Kong Carrie Lam invoked the Emergency Regulations Ordinance (ERO) for the first time in 50 years. The British colonial era law is functionally equivalent to martial law, granting the Chief Executive unlimited power to contain “serious public danger,” and gave police broad powers to, among other acts, arrest protesters who concealed their identities with a face covering at will. The British colonial government initially passed the ERO in a single day to crackdown on the wildcat 52-day Seamen’s Strike. It was used again by the British regime during the 1967 Riots to put down city-wide protests stemming from a labor struggle at a plastic flower factory. The significance of the law, therefore, is its primary use as a tool of labor repression against colonized people. In the case of 2019, Lam deployed the strong arm of the British past to halt the protests’ economic impact, crystallizing the continued supremacy of the imperative to protect mechanisms of capitalist accumulation, across colonial regimes.

In the face of the Communist Party of China’s (CPC) official program of “decolonization” (XXXX) in Hong Kong, the government has, in fact, eagerly retained the material colonial tools, practices, and institutions of colonial governance, such as the legislature made up largely of Beijing loyalists and corporate seats, making for a tacit endorsement of their usefulness in protecting Hong Kong’s primary role as a center for unfettered accumulation. The CPC’s betrayal of its own decolonizing promise epitomizes the fundamental disconnect between material conditions today and socialist strategy and dogma that continues to draw from the situated conditions of the Cold War. The United States’ rapprochement with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) throughout the 1970s, and the PRC’s transition to capitalism in the 1990s, has come at the cost of the accelerated labor exploitation of millions of mainland Chinese. If opposing a “New Cold War” is to mean anything today, it cannot refer to the fantasy of a vanguard Communist state defending itself and the Third World but, instead, must see the situation as the rising tension of inter-capitalist competition dangerously underwritten by two of the largest militaries on Earth.

The opposite has happened. Anti-imperialism as it is broadly conceived today across the Western left has moved further from material analysis of capitalist political economic conditions and toward discursive and ideological jockeying. But as Hong Kong’s struggle in the inter-imperial entanglement between the U.S. and the PRC shows, any principled anti-imperialism must be anti-capitalist to its core by identifying where capitalist practices occur and attacking them without

regard to national or racial allegiance. The fact that the U.S. remains the global imperial hegemon does not mean that anything less is acceptable, as the Maoist theory of contradiction often suggests, given that sub-empires such as the PRC aspire not to destroying the global capitalist order but merely seizing the reins as more efficient and technocratic directors of its machinery. As influential right-wing Chinese political philosopher Jiang Shigong argues, Chinese competition in the face of U.S. decline is “a struggle to become the heart of the world empire.”

Indeed, the PRC under President Xi Jinping, who rose to power in 2012, has not done much to hide these naked ambitions: Xi has declared a “People’s War on Terror” in response to national liberation movements in East Turkestan/“Xinjiang,” employing police theory drawn from British, Israeli, and U.S. counterinsurgency tactics invented by U.S. General David Petraeus during the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq. This “anti-terrorism” campaign, best known for its innovations in technological mass surveillance through biometrics and phone and internet tracking, have taken place alongside decades of colonial capitalist extractivism in oil rich regions in “Xinjiang,” as well as a growing militourist industry that dispossesses indigenous Kazakh and Uyghur people by force and places them on cultural reservations as sight-seeing attractions.

While the PRC’s three decades of unfettered capitalist accumulation has been represented by advocates as its rightful development of “productive forces,” it has also required extensive exchange, and indeed collaboration, with U.S. Empire: From making available incarcerated Uyghur labor to manufacture cotton textiles for U.S. and European fast fashion consumption to an eagerness to collaborate with figures from the U.S. military industrial complex such as Erik Prince and his post-Blackwater paramilitary security firm Frontier Services Group (FGS), which is majority owned by the Chinese government (a state-owned enterprise), with the bulk of its revenue coming from “securing” via mercenary force conflict zones in Africa, Central Asia, and South-East Asia to smooth the way for Chinese investment and infrastructure projects.

Meanwhile, hundreds of millions of rural migrant workers struggle against the caste-like *hukou* system (a designated place of residence based on birth), which, despite on-going reforms, still excludes swaths of rural *hukou* holders from urban privileges and social welfare. Many millions leave behind their family to work in urban centers in construction and other menial, manual, or precarious labor and face bodily danger, homelessness, and the common practice of wage theft or withholding months of back pay with little consequences. Labor organizers and striking workers are frequently detained, threatened, or physically attacked—independent unions are illegal. The infamous 2018 JASIC Incident, where Marxist university students organized to support striking tech factory workers, ended in harsh repression of both students and workers. The Belt and Road Initiative, often billed as “Third World Economic cooperation,” in fact, extends massive loans for infrastructure projects to nations on the African Continent, but offers little substantive alternative to predatory IMF lending, with the seizure of collateral as a common outcome. Meanwhile the far-flung ecological devastation of the Belt and Road Initiative is evident in local protests against Chinese industrial environmental degradation that impact local economies, from illegal overfishing to destruction of ecosystems for mining projects, in Gambia, Mauritania, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Senegal, and Ghana, as well as the Philippines and Brazil. These destructive planetary wages of capitalism throw into stark relief the pointless nature of continued attempts by Western anti-imperialists to isolate harm and responsibility within national boundaries.

Combined with entrenched transnational supply chains, to an entangled bond market, this capitalist exchange has become the lifeline of both U.S. and Chinese empires. Isolated struggles against the localized symptoms of late capitalism from mass incarceration to precaritization may

win victories, but defeating empire in the age of global capital means fighting the entirety of it. Our principled anti-imperialism must be anti-capitalist to its core. Any path forward toward principled anti-imperialism, be it anti-colonialism against the remnants of the British Empire, the present U.S. empire, or the PRC's sub-empire, will require concrete material analysis of how different trajectories of state-building and economic transition inflect governance strategies to implement, reproduce, and protect the mechanisms for capital accumulation.

Joy James' seminal 1996 book *Resisting State Violence* offers just such a structural and portable internationalism that identifies the supremacy of the nation-state form as key to repression in diverse, seemingly unrelated populations across the world. James argues that by targeting the violent practices and self-authorizing discourses of the state, revolutionaries can find practice-based commonalities that offer ways to engage in coalition and solidarity across polarizing differences. She notes that, "Solidarity is likely sustainable only where one confronts institutions that promote schisms between ethnic groups and where one can challenge the perception that the dominant state is both invulnerable and the only viable vehicle for safety and success." A new internationalism, as James urged, must recognize how fungible the various legal and juridical tools of repression are across states not simply because they can be and are frequently sold but because they are part of the repertoire of tactics that the nation-state as a formation uses to protect the stability of capital accumulation, regardless of nominal ideological differences.

As Ayantu Tibeso and J. Khadijah Abdurahman argued in a recent essay on Ethiopian empire in *The Funambulist*, one major task for a principled anti-imperialism is to find ways to talk about the empire at home, whose histories and conditions may be shaped by global white supremacy but are not reducible to it. In their words, "Our conceptions of the white supremacist global order unduly forecloses the possibility of an honest confrontation of intra-racial violences and the legacies of African empires." The challenge is to see the connection between the violence of state nationalisms in various domestic contexts and how they serve the demands of global capital—this requires a leap of faith, a bet against the state as "the only viable vehicle for safety and success."

In practice, because the conditions for international solidarity are so bleak, the Western left has taken a different path since the "alterglobalization" movement of the early 2000s, remaining largely unable to respond with any real conception of internationalism other than electoralism in the form of vocal support for "Pink Tide" governments, or worse, with a particular resurgence of economic nationalism across the center-left evidenced in Angela Nagles' "The Left Case Against Open Borders." Mass membership groups such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), who arguably direct the attention of popular socialism in the U.S., have similarly fallen short. Most recently, the DSA International Committee, which takes as its mission helping the DSA "connect in solidarity with like-minded activists, workers, movements, and parties worldwide," cast a majority vote *against* signing a statement condemning the Hong Kong government's dismantling of HKCTU, the city's only independent union federation. The majority opinion was a mealy-mouthed argument against "getting involved in the labor disputes of foreign countries."

Clearly a partisan move to avoid criticizing Beijing, the use of this soft-Stalinist line more broadly has gained traction after an infusion of a distorted new left moralism that argues we must all prioritize fighting the bourgeoisie at home and that we have no "right" to condemn foreign governments from the "imperial core" and the "belly of the beast." Nevermind that many such critics who are currently situated within the West may originate from, maintain ties to, or have experienced repression by foreign countries, this line of argument bespeaks the continued

hold of nation-state boundaries and imperialist discourses of “territorial integrity.” Succumbing to these nationalist discourses will accelerate the abandonment of grassroots proletarian struggle across borders by shearing any wisps of international solidarity in a world that has already been reshaped by, in the words of Jairus Banuji, the organic integration of capitals across boundaries. It is also a grave misjudgment in how to tackle intertwined imperialisms and colonialisms that have their roots gnarled tightly around the proletariat across the globe.

Referencing Lenin’s notion of politics as the shrewd calculation of grasping the proper link in the chain that will allow the seizure of the whole, U.S. Marxist-Leninist writer Sam Marcy declared in 1953: “The American proletariat is the link; the world proletariat is the chain. The American proletariat is historically the most important and decisive link for the fate of the whole chain.” Such a belief has led to the patronizing vanguardism of the U.S. left, who believe it is their right to dictate and direct uprisings and to withhold or issue solidarity according to their priorities to the dissenting populations of the global periphery. The global revolutions of the past two decades, which have taken no cue from the U.S. proletariat, show that this U.S.-centric vanguardism no longer holds, if indeed it ever did.

It may turn out that the end of history was not the eternal, uncontested triumph of capitalism, but simply the re-entrenchment of the binaries that define it. Against what is a powerful urge to reduce the world into binaries, from the Cold War framework that no longer applies, to the Manichean “you’re either with us or you’re against us” logic of the state, we must resist the enclosure of state nationalisms and their misappropriation of history. Hong Kong has only been the latest, highly visible flashpoint in this reinstatement of Cold War binarism and its paradoxes will likely prove to be paradigmatic for principled anti-imperialists everywhere. It is possible to fight imperialist practices wherever they appear, but it will require a principled focus on anti-capitalism, a materialist critique of the context-specific functions of state-building in capitalist accumulation, and a commitment to listening carefully to local voices over ideological credulity in the face of state pronouncements, to accomplish this feat.

Forming bonds of solidarity and offering material support to workers around the world suffering similarly under capital is not necessarily commensurate with doing the bidding of U.S. empire even though it can be easily co-opted, if done cavalierly. What we need to recognize first and foremost, however, is that U.S. leftists prioritizing the fight “at home” over the struggles and oppression of those “over there” is a spatial logic that no longer holds. The mass migrations after the nominal end of the Cold War mean that many of those from the periphery have since become part of the core, which has destabilized both categories. In other words, there is no longer a clean separation between the categories of “U.S. leftist” and those who do or do not deserve support abroad, if there ever was. The politics of isolationism disguised as non-interventionism operates under the logic of the state, even while purporting to struggle against it domestically. In the end, when we push past state nationalisms, there is nothing stopping us from principled and careful engagement with the countless people’s struggles that spring up autonomously around the world. But such praxis will require not confusing the ethical responsibilities of fighting the ruling class in the imperial core—only one set of actions required in any new form of internationalism—as inconsistent with a principled critique of existing material reality under global capital.

This work is already being done. Against the foreclosure of our political horizons, there is a global groundswell of socialists, anarchists, communists, and progressives who are connecting in the face of overwhelming state repression, its attendant nationalisms, and their popular agents of dissemination in the nominally “anti-imperialist” media. Taiwanese outlet *New Bloom*

critiques both U.S. imperial designs on the island while resisting the PRC's militarist ambitions; Lebanese scholar-activist Joey Ayoub's podcast *The Fire These Times*, draws together like-minded anti-nationalists from MENA to Asia; and the Lausan Collective has focused on continuing the work and analysis of Hong Kong radicals of the 1970s, who pushed against the nationalisms of the British colonial regime and the Maoists, while drawing unorthodox connections between colonized workers across the world. Regrounding in principles drawn from our history, extending the limited conceptual boundaries of the "Multitude," and holding up the sharp analysis of radicals such as Joy James will ensure that we continue building the legacy of a principled anti-imperialism that is anti-capitalist to its core.

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