



Defining Imperialism, Colonialism, and Neo-Colonialism

Defining Imperialism, Colonialism, and Neo-Colonialism

About Climate Vanguard

Climate Vanguard is a youth-led organisation empowering the youth climate movement through radical political education.

Please cite as

Climate Vanguard (2024). *'Defining Imperialism, Colonialism, and Neo-Colonialism,' Climate Vanguard: London.*

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Jason Hickel for his generosity of time and invaluable feedback on this brief.

Copyright

© Climate Vanguard CIC, 2024

This publication and its contents may be reproduced as long as the reference source is cited.

Definitions at a Glance

Imperialism

The arrangement that enables the systematic transfer of value from the Global South to the Global North, or, in other words, from the periphery to the imperial core of the capitalist world system.

Colonialism

The forced integration of a nation's economy and society into the capitalist world system, administered through the formal political control by one nation over another nation or territory.

Neo-colonialism

A political arrangement in which Southern states appear to have political independence, but are economically subordinated to the dictates of Northern capital.

Introduction

Imperialism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism have recently been brought to the forefront of popular consciousness through the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Equally, these systems have increasingly featured in the discourse of progressive movements in the Global North. Nevertheless, it can be difficult to understand what these systems actually are and how they relate to each other.

In this brief, we define imperialism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism in relation to the capitalist world system. A strong analysis of these systems is essential for developing revolutionary organising strategies.

Imperialism



Figure 1: Queen Elizabeth visits Ghana in 1961.

Imperialism arises from the capitalist mode of production.¹ It is, therefore, essential to grasp capitalism's central laws of motion in order to understand imperialism.

Capitalism is a system based on private ownership and elite control over the means of production (e.g. land, factories, machines, finance). Under this arrangement, individual capitalists are in constant competition with

each other to maximise profit. The resulting process of perpetual capital accumulation requires cheap inputs (such as labour, raw materials, land, and energy), an ever-growing supply of those cheap inputs, and new markets in which to sell commodities.²

Such an expansionary system cannot operate for long within an isolated economy. It requires an “outside,” a peripheral area from which it can acquire inputs as cheaply as possible and where it can dump the vast waste it produces – an area where lives, labour, and land are deemed to be worth less, both economically and in light of the ease with which they are destroyed, an area in which resistance can be cracked down upon with impunity.³

Because of this dynamic, capitalism is an uneven world system comprised of an imperial core (i.e. the Global North), where capital accumulates, and a periphery (i.e. the Global South), from which value is systematically drained.^{a,4} This appropriation has allowed for the development of the core, including its industrialisation and provisioning of public services, at the expense of the periphery, which remains deliberately under-developed and thus exploitable.⁵



Figure 2: *Cartoon, Hot Pies!* – Disraeli (Conservative Prime Minister), Salisbury (Foreign Secretary) and two others sit on low stools like schoolboys. The steaming pies they are eating are labelled with the names of various countries, including Cyprus, Zululand, Afghanistan and Turkey. As a waiter walks in carrying yet another pie, labelled, Burmah, Disraeli tells him they already have as much as they can manage! (1879).

Imperialism can thus be defined as the arrangement that enables the systematic transfer of value from the Global South to the Global North.⁶

In practice, ‘value’ is embodied in natural resources and labour appropriated from the South to the North. This drain has shaped capitalist development from its beginning – producing and reproducing the core-periphery dynamic – and remains a world-shaping force today.⁷

^a Henceforth in this brief, these terms (Global North/core and Global South/periphery) are used interchangeably.



Figure 3: Ugandan Prime Minister Apolo Milton Obote, speaking on stage following the declaration of Ugandan independence, Uganda, 10 September 1962. Burgis argues that the exploitation of colonialism continued after independence in many African states, as new ruling elites used natural resources to enhance their wealth and power at the expense of the public.

It is because of imperialism that the average annual income in Pakistan is \$1,560 while it is \$49,240 in the UK.⁸ It is because of imperialism that 24% of the world's agricultural land is in Africa, yet the continent is a net food importer and is the hungriest in the world.⁹ And it is because of imperialism that in 2023, life expectancy at birth in France was nearly 20 years greater than in Haiti.¹⁰

If imperialism is the drain of value from the periphery to the core, colonialism and neo-colonialism are the real historical political systems that have enabled the realisation of this dynamic. We now address each in sequential order.

Colonialism

Colonialism can be defined as the forced integration of a nation's economy and society into the capitalist world system, administered through the formal political control by one nation over another nation or territory.¹¹ This form of domination includes the imposition by the coloniser of particular kinds of institutions and norms designed to maintain the subordination and exploitation of the colonised.

The first period of colonial expansion dated from the late 15th century until the end of the 18th century, coinciding exactly with the rise of capitalism.¹² This stage began with the violent expansion of Spanish and Portuguese settlements across the Americas, as well as the mass enslavement of Africans. In the 19th century, as the Industrial Revolution – itself powered by imperial appropriation – gave European powers new capacities (e.g. steamboats, railroads, telegraph lines, etc.) to conquer lands previously beyond reach, colonial domination reached its peak.¹³



Figure 4: *La Bataille de Saint-Domingue*, painting of the Haitian Revolution by Janvier Suchodolski; 1845.

The turn of the 20th century saw the final expansion of European colonialism into the interior of Africa and the Middle East.¹⁴ Importantly, the history of colonisation was also shaped by resistance from the colonised. For example, it was the Haitian Revolution (1791 - 1804) which spearheaded the end of legal slavery.¹⁵

Colonialism facilitated imperial value flows in two ways. First, it enabled the drain of surplus value from the periphery to the core through slave rents (i.e. free labour) and by taking over existing mechanisms of surplus extraction – as exemplified by the British taking control of revenue collection in India which was previously controlled by Mughal emperors, and diverting these resources to the North.¹⁶ Between 1765 and 1938, trillions of dollars worth of goods were appropriated from Indian producers by British colonists.¹⁷

Second, colonialism enabled Europeans to control production and consumption in the Global South. Colonisers destroyed local subsistence economies through enclosure and dispossession, and/or imposed taxation in colonial currency, thus forcing people to seek wages on European mines and plantations or to produce goods for export to Europe.¹⁸ Colonisers also sought to destroy industrial producers in the Global South, which eliminated competition and created dependencies on Northern industrial goods.

Thus, the co-constitutive relationship between capitalism and colonialism should be understood as both producing development in the core and driving underdevelopment and de-development (i.e. the destruction of the productive forces) in the periphery.^{b, 19}

b 'Productive forces' refers to the means of production (i.e. raw materials, machines, factories, etc.) and labour (i.e. skills, knowledge, experience, physical capability, etc.).

It is then clear that colonialism is an enabling tool of imperialism based on formal political control by the coloniser. However, colonialism also involves extra-economic dynamics, including racism, the production of social trauma, and the distortion of the indigenous or national identity of the colonised, which cannot be captured through the lens of value flow alone.²⁰

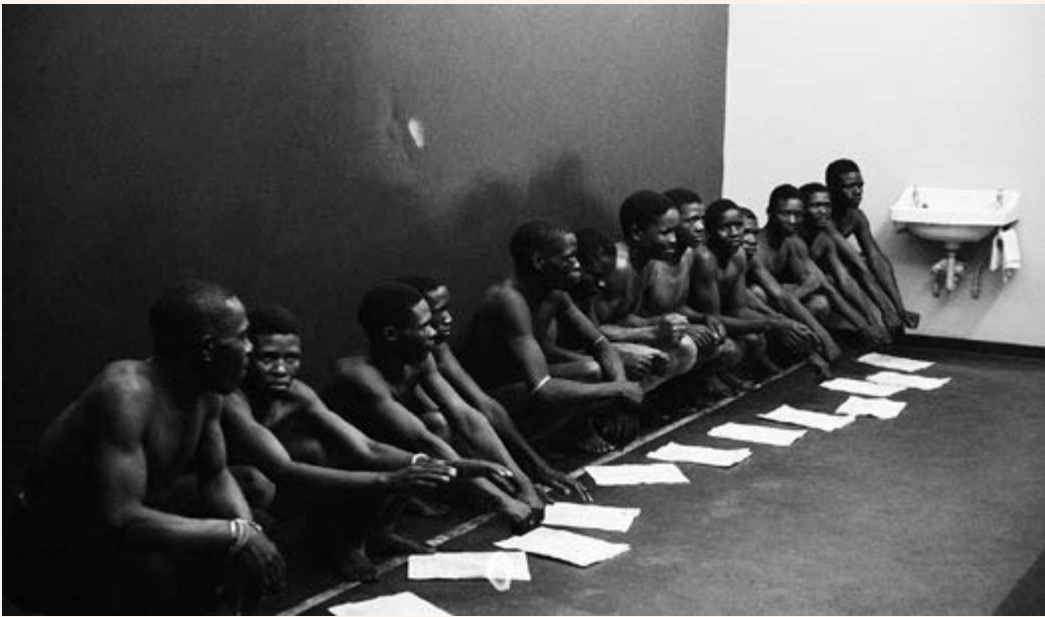


Figure 5: Jobseekers being processed en masse for employment on the Witwatersrand mines, South Africa. Photograph by Ernest Cole.

Settler Colonialism vs. Franchise Colonialism

A final note needs to be made on the distinction between colonialism's two basic forms: settler colonialism and franchise colonialism.

Settler colonialism is a process in which the settler population is "intent on making a territory their permanent home while continuing to enjoy metropolitan living standards and political privileges."²¹ Examples include the colonisation of the US, Canada, Australia, Israel, South Africa, Mexico, Peru, Algeria, and Kenya.

By contrast, franchise colonialism forcibly attaches itself onto an existing social, political, and economic base to extract value, depending, therefore, on the collaboration of local elites.²² Examples include the British in India and the Dutch in Indonesia.

Patrick Wolfe distinguishes the two forms by describing settler colonialism as the drive to eliminate the native population (either by displacement or genocide) and franchise colonialism as the drive to exploit the native population.²³ While this can be a helpful way to theoretically conceptualise the central logic behind each form, the elimination/exploitation divide is not so clear in practice.

The exploitation of native peoples, for example, through forced labour regimes, was central to the establishment and reproduction of many settler colonies (e.g. Algeria, Bolivia, South Africa).²⁴ Equally, the elimination of native populations was a much more general phenomenon which also occurred in franchise colonies (e.g. the Bengal famine).²⁵ In practice, both the exploitation and elimination of Indigenous communities has been used at different times in settler and franchise colonies “depending on strategic necessities, interactions with indigenous resistance, or changing economic relations with the metropolis.”²⁶

Without understanding this historical reality, we risk only focusing on the most advanced forms of settler colonialism (e.g. US, Canada, Australia) where the process of elimination is most extreme. In turn, we obscure cases where settler colonialism was defeated, as in many African and South American nations.²⁷ This more complete view of colonial history is crucial because it shows that it isn't such a stable system, and the trajectory of less developed settler colonies, like Israel, is far from pre-determined.

While colonialism still exists, the post World War II period saw a wave of decolonisation in which over 80 nations won political sovereignty.²⁸ This, however, was not the end of global imperialism.

Neo-Colonialism

The retreat of formal colonialism opened the door for its successor: neo-colonialism. Ghanaian revolutionary and political theorist Kwame Nkrumah defines neo-colonialism as a system where Southern states appear to have political independence, but are economically subordinated to the dictates of Northern capital.²⁹

Under neo-colonialism, value transfer occurs through unequal exchange in international trade, whereby Southern labour and resources are systematically cheapened relative to Northern prices. This “hidden transfer of value” is estimated at \$10.8 trillion per year.³⁰

There are three primary methods used by the North to establish and perpetuate this neo-colonial arrangement: regime change, debt, and trade institutions.

Regime Change



Figure 6: Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán at his inauguration as president of Guatemala in 1951.

Liberated from the shackles of colonialism, many post-colonial states pursued an ambitious program of sovereign development. This included economic protection via tariffs, subsidies, and capital controls, as well as land reform, industry nationalisation, public services, and real wage increases.³¹ Gains in the South meant higher costs for the North, imperilling unequal exchange, eroding profit margins, and straining the social-democratic compromise.^{c, 32}

In response, the North used “hybrid war” tactics (economic blockades, sanctions, cultural propaganda, assassinations, coup d’états) to depose popular leaders pursuing sovereign development, including Mohammad Mossadegh in Iran, Jacobo Árbenz in Guatemala, Sukarno in Indonesia, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, and Salvador Allende in Chile.³³ More

^c After World War II, a social-democratic compromise was struck between Northern labour and capital. This was a compromise insofar that the working class did not pursue revolutionary socialism, but a ‘regulated’ form of capitalism that promised real gains for workers. These gains, most importantly wage increases and welfare programs, depended on the super-exploitation of Southern labour, yielding the necessarily cheap commodity production for Northern profit sharing and welfare funding (also known as the imperial mode of living). In effect, social democracy is imperialist class collaboration.

recently, the arch-imperialist US has engaged in an unhinged spree of regime change, most notably in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Venezuela.³⁴

Debt

Equally effective for establishing control over Southern economies has been the neo-colonial instrumentalisation of debt.^d Flush with cash, Wall Street pumped money into the post-colonial South, which was “hungry for capital” to fund sovereign development.³⁵ In the early 1980s, these loans became unpayable after US interest rates (which the loans were based on) were hiked to curb domestic US inflation.³⁶

With the South in a state of economic turmoil, the North conditioned emergency debt relief on International Monetary Fund and World Bank Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs).³⁷ SAPs required that public spending be cut, public assets privatised, capital controls abolished, and labour and environmental regulations axed.³⁸ This re-oriented Southern economies in service of capital accumulation in the North.

Those who resisted, like Burkinabé revolutionary president Thomas Sankara, were swiftly ousted by imperialist powers, evidencing the 1-2 knockout punch of the neo-colonial order.³⁹

Between 1980 and 2015, Southern countries paid over \$4.2 trillion in interest payments to the North, far outstripping total aid received over the same time period.⁴⁰ Today, the South is in “the worst debt crisis since global records began.”⁴¹

Trade Institutions

Trade institutions are a third vector for the perpetuation of neo-colonialism.^e In 1995, imperialist powers restructured the global economy through the World Trade Organization (WTO). The WTO

d Debt in and of itself is not imperialist. For example, Chinese loans are not imperialist because they do not carry political conditionalities. Moreover, they have favourable interest rates, especially compared to the ones set by Northern states and private creditors. Debt should be understood as a dynamic that has the *latent potential* for imperialist relations.

e Similarly to debt, trade is not de facto imperialist. It only becomes so if wielded for the maintenance of unequal value flows between the South and North.

conditioned country membership on the reduction of tariffs, elimination of subsidies, and deregulation of capital flows. This deprived the entire South of the exact tools which the North had used for its own development.⁴² Adding insult to injury, Northern agricultural subsidies (totalling \$374 billion/year) were exempted from WTO rules, leading to an intrusion of Northern food products and the undermining of Southern food sovereignty.⁴³

The creation of the WTO was flanked by a profusion of free trade agreements (FTAs) between the North and South. Most FTAs include a provision known as Investor-State Dispute Settlements, which allows a private corporation to sue a state over sovereign policy action that threatens future profits (e.g. a wage increase).⁴⁴ Investors win 57% of cases, with an average taxpayer-funded payout of \$438 million.⁴⁵ If states refuse to foot the bill, then their foreign assets can be seized.⁴⁶

This brings Nkrumah's formulation into sharp relief: Southern political sovereignty is subordinated to neo-colonial imperialism



Figure 7: Palestinian youths burn tires during a protest near the Israel-Gaza border on February 23, 2023.

Conclusion

Imperialism, colonialism, and neo-colonialism are world-shaping systems responsible for unequal development, the denial of Southern sovereignty, widespread immiseration, famine, systemic poverty, and genocide, including the ongoing one in Gaza. Colonialism and neo-colonialism – both expressions of imperialism – are integral to the development, maintenance, and reproduction of global capitalism, combining to form *the* ‘system’ that is oppressing the global majority and driving ecological collapse.

Armed with this analysis, it is clear that all movements struggling for eco-socialist liberation must be ruthlessly anti-imperialist. In the North, this means unconditional support for national liberation struggles, a sharp focus on demilitarisation, and strong calls for debt cancellation and ecological reparations.

Thankfully, there are countless contemporary and historical movements from which to draw inspiration and leadership: the Palestinian liberation movement, Landless Workers’ Movement (MST) in Brasil, Revolutionary Bolivarian Movement-200 in Venezuela, the African Independence Party in Burkina Faso, and the Black Panther Party in the US.

Recalling Thomas Sankara,

“The only thing you need to remember is that when the people stand up, imperialism trembles.”



Figure 8: Bottom of Imperial Federation Map of the World Showing the Extent of the British Empire in 1886.

Endnotes

- 1 Patnaik, Utsa and Prabhat Patnaik. *Capital and Imperialism: Theory, History, and the Present*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2021.
- 2 Marx, Karl. *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy. Volume I*. London: Penguin, 1976.
- 3 Amin, Samir. (1974) "Accumulation and Development: A Theoretical Model," *Review of African Political Economy*, 1:9, 26.

Kadri, Ali. *The Accumulation of Waste. A political economy of systemic destruction*. Leiden: Brill, 2023.
- 4 Amin, Samir. (1974) "Accumulation and Development: A Theoretical Model," *Review of African Political Economy*, 1:9, 26.
- 5 Rodney, Walter. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London: Verso, 1972.

Patnaik, Utsa and Prabhat Patnaik. *Capital and Imperialism: Theory, History, and the Present*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2021.
- 6 Clelland, Donald A. "Global Value Transfers and Imperialism." In: Ness, I., Cope, Z. (eds) *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Emmanuel, A. *Unequal exchange: A study of the imperialism of trade*. London: New Left Books, 1972.
- 7 Patnaik, Utsa and Prabhat Patnaik. *Capital and Imperialism: Theory, History, and the Present*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2021.
- 8 World Data. "Average income around the world," *worlddata.info*, Accessed: 02 March 2024.

- 9 Kamande, Anthony. (2022) "Africa is so rich in farmland – so why is it still hungry?" *Oxfam: Views and Voices*. Accessed: 16 March 2024.
 - 10 Worldometer. "Life Expectancy of the World Population," *worldometers.info*, Accessed: 02 March 2024.
 - 11 Chandra, Bipan. (2008) "Colonialism, stages of colonialism and the colonial state," *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 10:3, 272-285.
 - 12 Englert, Sai. *Settler Colonialism: An Introduction*. London: Pluto Press, 2022.
 - 13 *Ibid.*
 - 14 *Ibid.*
 - 15 *Ibid.*
 - 16 Patnaik, Utsa, and Prabhat Patnaik. *Capital and Imperialism: Theory, History, and the Present*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2021.
 - 17 Chakrabarti, Shubhra, and Usta Patnaik. *Agrarian and Other Histories*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.
 - 18 Patnaik, Utsa, and Prabhat Patnaik. *Capital and Imperialism: Theory, History, and the Present*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2021.
 - 19 Kadri, Ali. *The Accumulation of Waste. A political economy of systemic destruction*. Leiden: Brill, 2023.
- Rodney, Walter. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London: Verso, 1972.
- 20 Dabiri, Emma. *What White People Can Do Next*. London: Penguin, 2021.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Penguin, 1952.
- 21 Elkins, Caroline, and Susan Pedersen. *Settler Colonialism in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Routledge, 2005.

- 22 Englert, Sai. (2023) "Settler colonialism and the birth of global capitalism," *rs21.org*, Accessed: 3 March 2024.
 - 23 Wolfe, Patrick. (2006) "Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native," *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8:4, 387-409.
 - 24 Englert, Sai. (2023) "Settler colonialism and the birth of global capitalism," *rs21.org*, Accessed: 03 March 2024.
 - 25 *Ibid.*
 - 26 Englert, Sai. (2020) "Settlers, Workers, and the Logic of Accumulation by Dispossession," *Antipode*, 6:52, 1561-1883.
 - 27 *Ibid.*
 - 28 United Nations. "List of former Trust and Non-Self-Governing Territories," *un.org*, Accessed: 03 March 2024.
 - 29 Nkrumah, Kwame. *Neo-Colonialism, the Last Stage of Imperialism 1965*, Available at: Marxists Internet Archive, 1965.
 - 30 Hickel, Jason et al. (2022) "Imperialist Appropriation in the World Economy: Drain from the Global South through Unequal Exchange, 1990–2015," *Global Environmental Change* 73.
 - 31 Hickel, Jason. (2021) "The Age of Imperialism Is Not Over - But We Can End It," *Current Affairs*, Accessed: 16 March 2024.
 - 32 *Ibid.*
 - 33 *Ibid.*
- Novaez, José. (2023) "Marxism and Colonialism: An Interview with Vijay Prashad," *Counterpunch*, Accessed: 16 March 2024.

34 Becker, Ben., and Mazda Majidi, (2018) "The Unipolar Era of Imperialism and Its Potential Undoing," *Liberation School*, Accessed: 16 March 2024.

Gilbert, Chris. (2023). "Where Danger Lies...": The Communal Alternative in Venezuela," *Monthly Review*, Accessed: 16 March 2024.

Goodman, Joshua. (2022). "Alleged Maduro Co-Conspirator Says CIA Knew about Coup Plans," *AP*, Accessed: 16 March 2024.

35 Hickel, Jason. *The Divide: A Brief Guide to Global Inequality and Its Solutions*. London: Windmill Books, 2018.

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Ibid.*

39 Talton, Benjamin. (2021) "Thomas Sankara Gave His Life Fighting Neocolonialism," *Jacobin*, Accessed: 16 March 2024.

40 Hickel, Jason. (2017) "Aid in Reverse: How Poor Countries Develop Rich Countries," *The Guardian*, Accessed: 16 March 2024.

41 Bretton Woods Project, (2023) "New Data Show Global South Is in Worst Debt Crisis Ever, with Another Lost Decade Looming," *Bretton Woods Project*, Accessed: 16 March 2024.

42 Hickel, Jason. *The Divide: A Brief Guide to Global Inequality and Its Solutions*. London: Windmill Books, 2018.

43 *Ibid.*

44 *Ibid.*

45 UNCTAD, (2021) "Investor-State Dispute Settlement Cases: Facts and Figures 2020," UNCTAD, Accessed: 16 March 2024.

Hodgson, Matthew., Yarik Kryvoi, and Daniel Hrcka, (2021) "2021 Empirical Study: Costs, Damages, and Duration in Investor-State Arbitration," Allen & Overy, Accessed: 16 March 2024.

46 Transnational Institute, (2021) "Profiting from Injustice," Transnational Institute, Accessed: 16 March 2024.