

## **The Theoretical Significance of Lenin's Imperialism\***

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The significance of Lenin's Imperialism lay in the fact that it totally revolutionised the perception of the revolution. Marx and Engels had already visualised the possibility of colonial and dependent countries having revolutions of their own even before the proletarian revolution in the metropolis, but these two sets of revolutions were seen to be disjoint; and both the trajectory of the revolution in the periphery and its relation to the socialist revolution in the metropolis remained unclear. Lenin's Imperialism not only linked the two sets of revolutions, but also made the revolution in the peripheral countries a part of the process of mankind's moving towards socialism.

It therefore saw the revolutionary process as an integrated whole; it visualised one single world revolutionary process, which, starting from a break at the weakest link in the chain, no matter where that link may be located, would overthrow the entire system. And it also affirmed that the time for such a world revolution had arrived as capitalism had reached a stage where it would thenceforth embroil mankind in catastrophic wars: it had "covered" the entire world leaving no "empty spaces", completely partitioning it into spheres of influence of different metropolitan powers, so that only a repartitioning of the world could now occur; and such re-partitioning could occur only through inter-imperialist wars of which the first world war was a classic example.

The theoretical position informing Imperialism extended Marxism in at least five major ways. First, it brought the "outlying regions" of the world, countries that Hegel had dismissed as having no history, into the ambit of the world revolution; indeed as time passed and as the hopes of a revolution in Europe following the Bolshevik Revolution began to fade, these countries moved to the centre-stage of world revolution. In one of his last writings, Lenin not only pinned his hopes on a revolution in China and India to succeed the Russian Revolution, but even derived satisfaction from the fact that Russia, China and India together accounted for nearly half of mankind so that revolutions in these three countries together would decisively shift the balance in favour of socialism. Not surprisingly, the Communist International that he helped to set up was unlike anything the world had ever seen until then, where delegates from India, China, Mexico and Indo-China rubbed shoulders with those from France, Germany and the United States.

Secondly, and parallelly, it extended the scope of Marxism from being a theory of the proletarian revolution in the advanced capitalist countries to a theory of world revolution. Of course cognising the much wider scope of Marxism, a reflection of the world domination of capital that Imperialism had emphasized, still required that the specific task of analysing the history of non-European societies on the basis of Marxist theory had to be carried out. But the extension and flourishing of Marxism in the third world provided the basis for such analyses, stimulated by the Comintern even when the latter's specific political readings happened to be erroneous. Lenin's Imperialism thus provided Marxism with an unprecedented vibrancy.

Lenin, to be sure, was not the first to talk of imperialism. Before him Rosa Luxemburg had provided a remarkably acute and insightful analysis explaining why capitalism needed to encroach on pre-capitalist markets. But Luxemburg's analysis suffered from the fact that it saw such encroachment as resulting in an assimilation of the pre-capitalist segment into capitalism. The pre-capitalist segment did not linger on as a devastated entity; it became part of the capitalist segment. The focus of Luxemburg's analysis therefore still remained a European proletarian revolution. Notwithstanding stray remarks to the contrary, it did not see a permanently segmented world being created by metropolitan capitalism. Lenin's Imperialism however did visualise such a permanently segmented world and therein lay its strength.

Thirdly, Lenin's theory provided a radically new interpretation of the concept of "historical obsolescence" of capitalism. Until then, based on Marx's brief remarks in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* the understanding had been that a mode of production became historically obsolete and hence ripe for overthrow only when the scope for any further development of productive forces within it got exhausted; and such exhaustion was typically supposed to manifest itself in the form of a crisis. The absence of any such crisis in fact had prompted Bernstein's demand to "revise" Marxism, to substitute a reform of the system in lieu of its overthrow, as the proletariat's desideratum. Those adhering to the revolutionary tradition, as against Bernstein, sought to prove that such a terminal crisis which might not have arisen yet, was nonetheless inevitable.

Lenin's theory of imperialism broke completely new ground here. The manifestation of capitalism's historical obsolescence, its ripeness for overthrow, was not any economic crisis but the fact that it had entered a phase where it engulfed mankind in devastating wars, wars in which the workers of one country were made to fight the workers of another across trenches. When this happened, the time had come to convert the imperialist war into civil wars, to turn one's guns away from one's fellow workers across the trenches towards the capitalists in each country.

Fourth, socialism was now to be the goal of all revolutions no matter where they occurred. The idea of the democratic revolution not being carried forward in countries arriving late to capitalism by the bourgeoisie which had historically played the role of being its harbinger, had already appeared in Lenin's *Two Tactics of Social Democracy*: in such societies the task of carrying forward the democratic revolution fell to the proletariat, which would enter into an alliance with the peasantry, and having led the democratic revolution, would not just stop there but would go on to building socialism. But now this perspective of a revolution in a peripheral society, initially against imperialism and based on a broad class alliance with workers and peasants at its core, and then moving on to the socialist stage, became generalised. The task of building socialism in short was no longer a concern only of the advanced country workers; it was a task to be achieved through stages that had come on the agenda of all societies.

Finally, a fundamental question had arisen: why had there been such a growth of "reformism" in the European working class movement that so many leaders of the second international had adopted either opportunist or downright social chauvinist positions during the war; and Lenin provided an answer to this question, on the basis of an earlier suggestion of Engels by developing the concept of a "labour aristocracy" that had been "bribed" from imperial super-profits.

Imperialism was a stupendous theoretical achievement. Lenin had once remarked that the strength of Marxism lay in its being true. One can make a similar statement about Lenin's theory of imperialism as well. A remarkable tour de force, it provided answers, almost with blinding illumination, to a whole range of questions that had come up in the new conjuncture and cried out for answers. One could quarrel with this or that detail of Lenin's argument, but its overall thrust was almost overwhelmingly correct. And an index of its correctness is the almost uncanny manner in which it anticipated the developments in the world in the period between 1914 and 1939.

The world today however has moved away from what Lenin had written about in Imperialism. A major feature of this difference is that centralisation of capital has proceeded much further than in Lenin's time, giving rise to an international finance capital, in the place of the national finance capitals that held sway then. Inter-imperialist rivalries consequently have become muted, since international finance capital does not want the world broken up into different spheres of influence; it wants instead an unpartitioned world for its unrestricted movement. The question of wars caused by inter-imperialist rivalry therefore does not arise any more.

This however does not mean the dawning of an era of peace. International finance capital's relentless offensive against all national efforts in the third world towards economic independence and economic (including food) self-sufficiency, has brought about a spate of local conflicts, pitting a united imperialism against particular countries. At the same time, the exploitation of the working people of the third world has become greatly intensified, even as the corporate-financial oligarchy within it has got integrated with international finance capital; the result is a massive growth of inequality within the third world, to a point where large segments of the population have witnessed increased absolute poverty in nutritional terms. At the same time, the greater willingness of metropolitan capital to relocate activities to the global south, has weakened the trade unions in the metropolis and led to an increase in inequality within the metropolis itself. The hegemony of international finance capital, expressed in a neo-liberal order, has entailed therefore a significant worsening in relative, and even absolute, terms in the conditions of the working people of the world.

This has given rise to a crisis of over-production to which there is no solution within the neo-liberal global order. And this crisis has given rise to an upsurge of fascism and neo-fascism all over the world, with the corporate-financial oligarchies in various countries entering into alliances with fascistic groups to retain their hegemony. The struggle for democratic rights, the struggle against unemployment and the struggle for civil liberties have thus come to the forefront; and this struggle has got linked to the struggle for socialism. Lenin's revolutionising the perspective of the world revolution remains valid, but the immediate focus of the revolution has changed with the times.

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