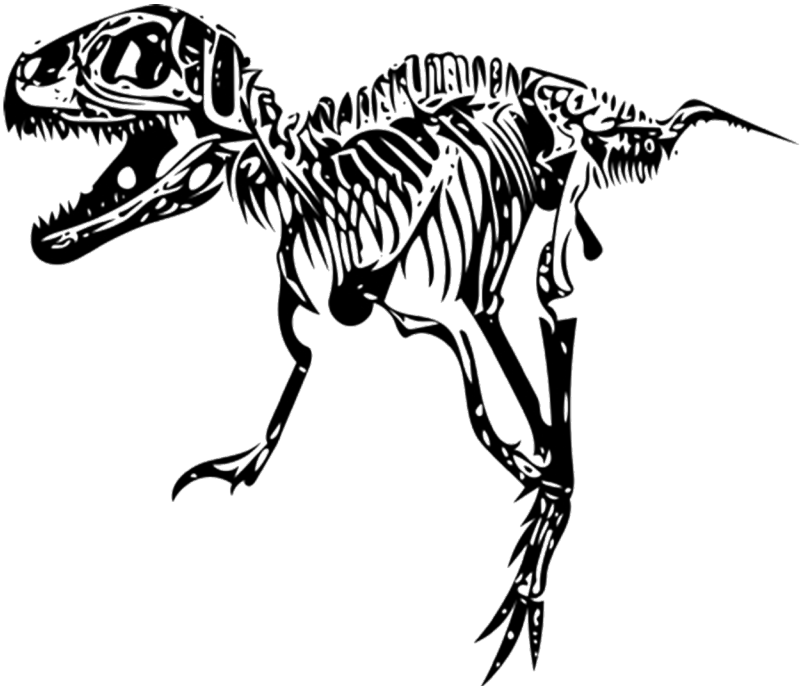


FULL BODY SCAN: IMPERIALISM TODAY

*Gabriel Kuhn's "Oppressor and Oppressed Nations:
Sketching a Taxonomy of Imperialism", with a
response from Bromma*



FULL BODY SCAN: IMPERIALISM TODAY

Oppressor and Oppressed Nations:
Sketching a Taxonomy of Imperialism

Gabriel Kuhn

Thoughts On Taxonomy

Bromma

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Full Body Scan: Imperialism Today

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This pamphlet is the result of a correspondence that followed the publication of Gabriel Kuhn's text "Oppressor and Oppressed Nations: Sketching a Taxonomy of Imperialism" on the Kersplebedeb website in June 2017.

We hope that it can stimulate further discussion on the nature of imperialism and the possibilities of anti-imperialist resistance.

Kersplebedeb can be contacted at:

Kersplebedeb
CP 63560, CCCP Van Horne
Montreal, Quebec
Canada
H3W 3H8

or email info@kersplebedeb.com

Visit the Kersplebedeb website at <http://www.kersplebedeb.com>

CONTENTS

Oppressor and Oppressed Nations:
Sketching a Taxonomy of Imperialism 3
Gabriel Kuhn

Thoughts On *Taxonomy* 17
Bromma

Postscript 29
Gabriel Kuhn

Post-Postscript 31
Bromma



OPPRESSOR AND OPPRESSED NATIONS: SKETCHING A TAXONOMY OF IMPERIALISM

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the left has shown a renewed interest in anti-imperialism. This is an encouraging development, since global economic injustice remains one of the most glaring contradictions of the capitalist order. After having been a central part of anti-capitalist struggles in the 1970s, anti-imperialism largely vanished from left radars. Among the reasons were the demise of socialist national liberation movements as well as the often disappointing record of them seizing power; the defeat of anti-imperialist armed groups in the metropolis; the fall of the Soviet Union and its consequences; the adaptation of anti-imperialist rhetoric by reactionary actors; the uncanny relationship between anti-imperialism and anti-Semitism; and the substitution of multitudes fighting various forms of oppression for a much more straightforward good-vs.-bad script.

Among the reasons for the resurgence of anti-imperialism are the limitations of a postmodern anti-oppression analysis unearthing so many injustices that it can't properly analyze and attack any of them; the urgency of organizing effective left-wing resistance in the face of neoliberal domination and the increasing threat of fascism; the reemergence of internationalist perspectives through the support of struggles in the periphery, especially in Kurdistan; and the ongoing—and growing—disparities in the global distribution of wealth,

not least highlighted by authors hardly known as radicals such as Thomas Piketty (*Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, 2013) or Branko Milanović (*Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization*, 2016).

English-language publications that have brought left-wing anti-imperialism back to the fore are Zak Cope's *Divided World Divided Class: Global Political Economy and the Stratification of Labour Under Capitalism* (2012), Samir Amin's *The Implosion of Contemporary Capitalism* (2013), Gabriel Kuhn's *Turning Money into Rebellion: The Unlikely Story of Denmark's Revolutionary Bank Robbers* (2014), the 2015 *Monthly Review* special issue on "The New Imperialism", and John Smith's *Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century: Globalization, Super-Exploitation, and Capitalism's Final Crisis* (2016).

At the same time, the picture of what imperialism is and, perhaps more importantly, what it looks like on the ground remains murky. Sometimes, anti-imperialism is used as a synonym for anti-colonialism. Sometimes, it is used whenever one nation attacks another. And in its crudest form, it simply means anti-Americanism. This is no viable basis for effective political resistance. If we want to combat imperialism—which is necessary to combat capitalism—we need to have an understanding of what it looks like, how it functions, and where we need to hit it.

This also requires translating some very abstract concepts into a language that becomes relevant for activists. The abstract concepts and related debates are important (unless they deteriorate into irrelevant quibbles between big men, which, sadly, happens regularly), but they are unlikely to generate much action if they stay in ivory towers. How do we fight "generalized-monopoly capitalism," "super-exploitation," or "unequal exchange"? Some concrete and tangible questions are: Who benefits from imperialism? Are there centers of imperialist power? How can imperialism be attacked?

In the 1970s, when the anti-imperialist movement was at its peak, the world was divided into rather simple categories: First World nations were the villains, Third World nations the victims, and—depending on one's ideological persuasion—Second World nations heroic allies to the Third World, neutral, or an equally imperialist Soviet-led bloc. Today, things have become messier; or, let's say, the mess has become more obvious.

Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory, employing the categories of core, semi-periphery, and periphery, is more sophisticated, but not bereft of

problems. It is strongly based on economic data, pays little attention to differences within the three main categories, and has difficulties accounting for the at times enormous contradictions within single countries.

A proper taxonomy of imperialism needs to take into consideration not only the relationship between economic systems, political formations, and cultural hegemonies, but also the one between nations and classes.

I am not claiming to provide any answers in this sketch. I am trying to help facilitate a discussion that will lead to a picture of the imperialist world complex enough to function as a base for effective anti-imperialist resistance.

Among the questions that motivated me to draw this sketch are the following:

- Why are there oppressor nations that never had colonies or even once were colonies themselves?
- What is the status of nations serving the imperialist system as financial centers or tax havens?
- Where are the countries of the former Second World positioned in today's global order?
- What is the role of Newly Industrialized Countries (NICs) or the often cited BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa)?
- Is there any such thing as an internal colony?
- Can oppressor nations and oppressed nations coexist in one and the same nation state?
- How do class formations and migration affect the picture?

The sketch presented here is based on involvement in internationalist and anti-imperialist projects, the study of relevant literature, and, most importantly, the experiences of many years of traveling on all continents, meeting with laborers and peasants as well as with politicians and academics. While the paper will hopefully be relevant for all readers with anti-imperialist leanings, the target audience of the practical implications are anti-imperialist activists in the First World such as myself. People in different positions will discuss the forms their own resistance needs to take. The trick is to combine the respective approaches into a common effective movement.

WORKING DEFINITION

The question of whether a certain country, policy, or action is imperialist, is, first and foremost, a matter of definition. Whether China is an imperialist country or not, does, for example, not depend on whether the essence of the nation of China contains an imperialist element, but on whether the country's role in the global economic and political order fits our definition of what imperialism is. In other words, we can't talk about imperialism (or anti-imperialism) and hope to clarify things without providing a definition of what we are talking about.

Any discussion can come to an instant halt when passionately arguing over the best definition of what is being discussed. There are certain criteria that seem commonly accepted as qualities of a good definition (it ought to be coherent and clear, neither too wide nor too small, etc.), but there is no objective measure to identify the one that trumps all others. In order to make sense of the following pages, I therefore need to ask the reader to accept the working definition of imperialism offered here—which, of course, does not mean that it can't be criticized.

I will not follow an exclusively Marxist take. In *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917), Lenin defined imperialism thus: "Imperialism is capitalism at that stage of development at which the dominance of monopolies and finance capital is established; in which the export of capital has acquired pronounced importance; in which the division of the world among the international trusts has begun, in which the division of all territories of the globe among the biggest capitalist powers has been completed." This economic approach is of crucial importance, but there have been others within the left. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said defined imperialism as "the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory." This, of course, is very brief. The working definition I am suggesting is the following:

Imperialism is a system where a conglomerate of capitalists, politicians, and security forces asserts control over a particular territory and its population to increase its own wealth. In order to establish its authority, it uses ideological means (racism), cultural means (proselytism), political means (direct or indirect colonialism), economic means (exploitation), and military means (the stationing of its own security forces, the employment of mercenaries, or the creation

of dependent local police and military). A characteristic (albeit not necessary) feature of imperialism is the conglomerate sharing a part of the extracted wealth with the population in its home countries to secure that population's support for the imperialist project. Therefore, labor aristocracies are an inherent feature of the imperialist order.

It is important to note that, according to this definition, imperialism doesn't simply mean that a certain population wants to extend the territory it controls. Fights over territory have been part of humanity since time eternal, caused by competition over natural resources and other factors. This is not imperialism. Imperialism means to extend one's sphere of control in order to institutionalize the exploitation of the (human and natural) resources of the territories brought under one's control. This is why any analysis of the former Soviet Union having been an imperialist power must imply an understanding of the Soviet Union not as a socialist country but a state capitalist country. In my understanding, this analysis is correct and also applies to today's China (see "sub-imperialism" below).

NATIONS AND EMPIRES

The terminology commonly used in reference to imperialism has for a long time rested on a strict dualism. (Mao's Three Worlds Theory might count as an exception but never had much resonance in anti-imperialist circles—and, for that matter, not even in Maoist ones.) The world is divided into two big camps. Lenin's distinction between "oppressor nations" and "oppressed nations" has been reproduced in numerous variations, whether it was juxtaposing the "First World" to the "Third World," the "metropolis" to the "periphery," or the "Global North" to the "Global South." Such a dualism can be useful for orientation, but, unsurprisingly, things are more complicated when you look at the details.

In their modern-day classic *Empire* (2000), Michael Hardt and Toni Negri proclaimed that "imperialism is over," citing the "declining sovereignty of nation-states" and "their increasing inability to regulate economic and cultural exchanges." Hardt and Negri contended that "we continually find the First

World in the Third, the Third in the First, and the Second almost nowhere at all.”

Well. First, imperialism is not dependent on the Three-World Model. Second, to suggest that economic power no longer has a location and that the oppressors and the oppressed randomly mingle across the globe is false. No one who has ever been to both Paris and Niamey could seriously make such a claim, extreme expressions of poverty in Paris and of obscene wealth in Niamey notwithstanding. Third, nation states have lost neither their meaning nor their power in a globalized world. Neoliberalism might have pronounced the fact that nation states are not isolated and certain multinational corporations may have a frightening influence on international relations, but despite corporate power, free trade agreements, and international political bodies, nation states remain the key units of the global political order and the main actors in the administration of capital. Perhaps most importantly, they are central for the division of the world's riches. Citizenship is the single most important factor in deciding which share an individual can expect in the distribution of wealth and related privilege. And while the power of multinational corporations might extend to all corners of the earth, these corporations have much tighter relationships and shared interests with the ruling classes of certain nation states than with those of others. It is therefore not only legitimate but necessary to focus on nation states when sketching the imperialist order, and it is also important to consider nations without their own state, from First Nations on the American continent to Kurds and Basques. Nations are defined as peoples with a collective identity based on traits such as language, culture, and an intimate relationship to a certain territory.

Of course, the position of individuals within the imperialist order is not exclusively determined by citizenship, national affiliation, or place of residence. There are national bourgeoisies profiting from imperialism even in the poorest of countries; there are expatriate communities acting as agents of imperialism in oppressed nations; there are undocumented migrants in imperialist nations who do not benefit from the imperialist order; there is an urban-rural divide that needs to be accounted for; and there are millions of women who constitute what Maria Mies and others have called the “last colony” in an imperialist system inseparable from patriarchal power. Any detailed study of imperialism's workings must consider this. Unfortunately, the task is beyond the scope of this paper, but I will return to some of the mentioned aspects in the concluding remarks on anti-imperialist practice.

TAXONOMY

In the following sketch of a taxonomy of imperialism, I will use three main categories: imperialist nations, sub-imperialist nations, and oppressed nations. Each group will be divided into several subcategories. Certain nations straddle the boundaries of various categories. This seems inevitable given the generalizations required in a rough sketch such as this one.

I am not claiming that my categorizations of individual nations are superior to others, let alone the only ones possible. It is not a priority here to get every single categorization right. The goal is rather to help outline a framework that allows for meaningful collective categorization and, ultimately, well-informed anti-imperialist resistance.

I IMPERIALIST NATIONS

1. IMPERIALIST CORE

The imperialist core consists of those nations whose citizens profit from the imperialist system. Each nation has a class that profits from the imperialist system, but only the imperialist core nations can extend this privilege to their entire populations. Imperialist core nations also run very little risk of being pushed to the margins of the imperialist order. Power balances between them can shift, but each of them is firmly entrenched in imperialist rule, due to a combination of economic, political, and military reasons; key aspects (although not all of them need to be present in each imperialist core nation) are strong productive and finance capital, military prowess, racial privilege, advantageous geographical location, and a world language, preferably English, as the national language.

It is not necessary for imperialist core nations to have been colonial powers. Colonialism is a part of the imperialist project, but it is not a requirement for profiting from it. Imperialism is broader than colonialism. In fact, several former colonies (most notably, the United States of America) belong to the

current imperialist core, while some former colonial powers (for example, Spain and Portugal) belong to the imperialist periphery.

It would also be a mistake to identify the imperialist core nations as those invited to powerful summits such as the G20. Some G20 nations are invited because they are important for the imperialist order (for example, India and Indonesia), not because they belong to the imperialist core.

Currently, the imperialist core consists of only one united bloc. In the case of strong rivalry and a relative balance of power, the imperialist core can split into different blocs. This was the case during the Cold War, when the U.S.-led imperialism of the Triad (North America, Western Europe, Japan) was challenged by the imperialism of the Soviet Union.

The imperialist core nations can be divided into four subcategories:

- a) The colonial powers, that is, nations that controlled and exploited large territories for prolonged periods, thereby increasing their wealth and global influence: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Japan, and the Netherlands. Present-day Austria is a special case, still profiting from its former internal colonies, that is, the non-German-speaking parts of the Austrian Empire.
- b) Nations that had no colonies of their own (other than perhaps small overseas territories that mainly satisfied national prestige) but were intrinsically linked to colonial exploitation through Eurocentric and racist ideology, political alliance, and trade: Luxembourg, Norway, Switzerland, Sweden, and European micro-states such as Andorra, Monaco, and Liechtenstein.
- c) Former colonies with white settler populations that acquired internal and external colonies of their own and became an integral part of the imperialist order of the Triad: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States of America.
- d) Israel is a special case. It is a former colony turned settler nation, albeit not a white settler nation akin to the examples above. Israel is also a sub-imperialist power (see below) when considering its role in

the Middle East. It is hugely dependent on the Triad for its survival, which is a characteristic of the nations of the imperialist dependency rather than the core. However, Israel's geopolitical role for the Triad is so important that its place in it seems firm and it can be considered part of the imperialist core.

2 IMPERIALIST PERIPHERY

The imperialist periphery consists of nations whose citizens profit from the imperialist order because of white supremacy, vicinity to core nations, political ties, and trade relations. However, these nations are exploited by the core nations and their standing within the imperialist nations is fragile.

The nations of the imperialist periphery can be divided into two subcategories:

- a) The European periphery, which includes Western-oriented former Soviet republics (such as the Baltic states), former Warsaw Pact members (such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland), and former Yugoslav republics (such as Croatia and Slovenia), as well as Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, and Spain.
- b) Occupied territories of self-identified nations (or including majority self-identified nations) within the Triad, such as the Basque Country, Catalonia, Corsica, Northern Ireland, Okinawa/Ryukyus, and Quebec. Exploitation is relative in these cases (people in Catalonia are economically better off than the people in most of Spain's other regions, etc.), and the strength of independence/secession movements varies largely. But due to these nations' lack of self-determination, they cannot be considered imperialist core.

3 IMPERIALIST DEPENDENCY

The imperialist dependency consists of nations that serve specific roles in the imperialist system as cost-efficient production sites, suppliers of rare raw materials, tax havens, exclusive holiday destinations, or locations of military bases. They benefit from this, but their standing within the imperialist order is entirely conditional.

The imperialist dependency can be divided into four subcategories:

- a) The Gulf States Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates.
- b) The Asian Tigers Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan. (The status of Hong Kong is difficult to assess since the territory's return to China in 1997.) These nations could also count as imperialist periphery, but their geographic isolation speaks against this.
- c) Some micro-states in the Caribbean (such as Bermuda or the Bahamas), the Pacific (such as Nauru), and the Indian Ocean (such as Mauritius and the Seychelles).
- d) Dependencies of imperialist nations such as the French overseas territories (e.g. French-Polynesia, Guadeloupe, Martinique, New Caledonia, and Réunion) and U.S. American overseas territories (e.g. American Samoa, Guam, and Puerto Rico). It is important to note that the indigenous peoples of these territories must be considered oppressed nations (see below).

II SUB-IMPERIALIST NATIONS

Sub-imperialist nations are nations outside of the imperialist core with imperialist ambitions. They can act as regional imperialist powers and/or aim to enter the imperialist core, either as allies of the current bloc or as rivals. Sub-imperialist qualities also apply to imperialist core nations that act as regional centers of power, for example Australia in the Asia-Pacific region.

Sub-imperialist nations can be divided into five (quite distinct) subcategories:

- a) China is possibly the most contested example, as some would define it as an imperialist nation (see, for example, N.B. Turner's *Is China an Imperialist Country?*, 2015), while others would strongly reject the characterization of China as imperialist in any form. In my understanding, China has imperialist ambitions, but no matter how much it aims to extend its reach (especially in Asia and Africa), the vast majority of its population is still exploited by the Triad. In other words, China is not (yet) a rival of the imperialist core nations.
- b) Russia and its Second World allies: The current Russian Federation is the successor to powers with imperialist ambitions, that is, the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union. This legacy remains, but Russia and its current allies (predominantly former Soviet Republics, such as Belarus and Kazakhstan) cannot compete with the Triad. Some former Soviet Republics, most notably the Ukraine, are caught in a struggle between forces remaining loyal to the Russian project on the one hand, and forces that want to enter the Triad's periphery on the other.
- c) There are three nations in the Middle East/Arab Peninsula with an imperialist legacy that continue to act as sub-imperialist powers: Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. Due to both internal rivalries and the strong efforts of the imperialist core to control the region, the reach of these nations remains limited (although it can be felt in many ways, especially in financial and military support for ideological

allies). There are also huge differences in how these nations relate to the Triad: Iran is sub-imperialist in the purest sense, while Saudi Arabia could count as part of the imperialist dependency, and Turkey as part of the imperialist periphery.

- d) Brazil, Argentina, and Uruguay are characterized by huge income gaps and the oppression of indigenous nations, yet they have a high level of industrialization, well-established middle and upper classes, and an economic sway over South America, which renders them sub-imperialist. (Arguably, Mexico plays a similar role in Central America but has less economic strength and is overshadowed by its neighbor to the north, the United States.)
- e) South Africa is a particular case. It is sub-imperialist with regard to its role in (particularly southern) Africa. It is also the home of a white settler community that can be considered part of the imperialist core. At the same time, the majority of the country's population lives under Third World conditions. No other country (except Israel, perhaps) straddles the boundaries of the categories used here in more ways.

III OPPRESSED NATIONS

Oppressed nations are nations whose citizens, by and large, are victims of the imperialist order, notwithstanding national bourgeoisies and privileged expatriate communities.

This category includes all nations in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America, and Oceania, except the ones listed in other categories above. There are huge differences between these nations (Egypt is not Chad, and Malaysia not the Solomon Islands), but they are all exploited and oppressed by the imperialist nations and have little (or no) influence on global power structures. The differences between these nations must be analyzed on the basis of their respective histories, the colonial (and neocolonial) regimes they were and are

subjected to, their assets in terms of raw materials and manpower, their land-mass and location, and their populations' racial identification.

This category also includes nations that are not united in a nation state, except for those belonging to the imperialist periphery (see above). Concretely, this means the peoples of occupied territories such as Palestine and the Western Sahara, nations divided into different nation states such as the Kurds, First Nations in the Americas and in Oceania, traveling people such as Roma and Sinti, and the indigenous populations of French and American overseas territories. Members of these nations have sometimes relatively privileged access to wealth and opportunity because of their partial integration into and/or their proximity to the imperialist core, but the nations themselves are denied self-determination and remain oppressed.

CONCLUSION: REMARKS ON ANTI-IMPERIALIST PRACTICE

If the outline sketched here has any validity, the following are, in my eyes, the most important implications for anti-imperialist practice:

1. The struggle against imperialism must be led by indigenous movements and progressive working-class and peasant movements in the Global South.
2. Especially in nations with a weak education system and a high level of government repression, alliances with the progressive sectors of the bourgeoisie are mandatory, no matter the dangers they entail.
3. It is crucial to support experiments searching for economic alternatives to capitalism. These include cooperative farms, worker-controlled factories, and exchange economies. Imperialism cannot be separated from capitalism and to fight it means to establish a different economic order.

4. Sub-imperialist countries pose no threat to the imperialist order. They might pose a threat to the current imperialist core and can possibly enforce a more balanced distribution of imperialist power and wealth, but they are unable (and unwilling) to change the imperialist system itself.

5. The most important struggles occur in the oppressed nations and in the imperialist core nations. It is at both ends of the imperialist system where it is most vulnerable. Struggles in the imperialist periphery and dependency are important as possible instigators of struggles in the core and in the oppressed nations, but they themselves have little potential to threaten the imperialist order. Struggles in sub-imperialist nations require specific analysis. Often, they are similar to struggles in the imperialist periphery and dependency; in certain cases, however, when they concern central links in the imperialist order, their potential is significantly bigger. Workers' struggles in China are a current example.

6. In the imperialist core, various initiatives are of importance: campaigns for global justice around issues that broad sections of the population can relate to, for example Third World debt; the redistribution of funds to progressive actors in the oppressed nations; political alliances with migrants; linking anti-racist and anti-patriarchal struggles to anti-imperialist struggles; and developing forms of economic production, distribution, and consumption that undermine capitalist demands for permanent growth and circulation.

*Gabriel Kubn
June 2017*



THOUGHTS ON TAXONOMY

Dear Gabriel Kuhn,

I was glad to read your recent text, *Oppressor and Oppressed Nations: Sketching a Taxonomy of Imperialism*. As you say, there's a pressing need to discuss "what imperialism is and, more importantly, what it looks like on the ground," especially given all the economic and political changes that have occurred since the 1970s. I strongly agree that "crude anti-Americanism ... is no viable basis for effective political resistance. If we want to combat imperialism ... we need to have an understanding of what it looks like, how it functions, and where we need to hit it."

One of your essay's strengths is its uncompromising attitude toward privilege and inequality. I share your opinion that "global economic injustice remains one of the most glaring contradictions of the capitalist order." I think you're also right to insist that imperial privilege reaches deep into many populations, including some that are themselves otherwise oppressed. Taxonomy takes a hard look at the different ways countries participate in imperialism, making important distinctions based on their specific economic and political roles.

I appreciate the way you shared your ideas about imperialism without claiming to know all the answers, even though the essay is obviously based on a lot of thought. Instead, you have offered to facilitate a discussion about imperialism. This is a good way to look at political writing, and I think fellow anti-imperialists, myself included, should not only thank you for this but also follow your example.

In that spirit, I'd like to offer my comments as a contribution to the discussion. Although we have differences, your essay has pushed me to re-examine my

own ideas about imperialism, causing me to question some and sharpen others. So from my selfish point of view, your essay has been very helpful. In the end, I've concluded that our differences are not as large as I originally thought. More important, I feel that we have a common objective—to find a way to destroy imperialism in all its aspects.

My comments raise three main issues. The first is that, by concentrating so heavily on disparities among *countries*, "Taxonomy" underestimates the role played by other contradictions crucial to imperialism, such as nationality, class, and gender. It's not that you're unaware of these other aspects of imperialism—you acknowledge them and sometimes discuss them. But generally speaking, they're subordinate to the essay's emphasis on classifying countries.

My second observation is that the essay doesn't take into account the changes caused by globalization, which, I believe, have significantly reorganized imperialism.

A third point is that the essay doesn't fully connect imperialism to the dynamics of monopoly capitalism. In the absence of this connection, the essay's view of imperialism sometimes seems static and flat.

1. COUNTRIES, NATIONS, CITIZENS

To analyze imperialism, I think it's useful to make a distinction between *countries* and *nations*. In informal conversation, we often use the terms interchangeably. But strictly speaking, they are different kinds of social formations, which often interact with imperialism in different ways. A country is defined by a state, borders, and citizenship. A nation is a social organism united by shared culture, history, and other factors. *Country* and *nation* are categories that frequently overlap, but that seldom line up neatly with each other. In fact, few countries are nationally homogeneous: most are nationally diverse, and many contain antagonistic national contradictions, including those between oppressor and oppressed nations. These national fault lines significantly affect people's roles within imperialism.

Despite its title, most of Taxonomy is devoted to categorizing *countries*,

not *nations*. Countries are classified in the essay according to the average wealth of their citizens, as well as their political and economic relationship to “core imperialist” powers. Understanding the different roles that countries and citizenship play within imperialism certainly is valuable. But I think we should avoid treating countries as if they are the basic units by which imperialism is organized. Countries and citizenship make up only one layer of imperialism. And, depending on the situation, that layer is not necessarily the most important one for determining a social group’s oppression, privilege, or overall place in the imperialist system.

I think that one specific way that the overemphasis on countries and citizenship becomes problematic in Taxonomy is that the essay sometimes downplays the *national* contradictions between the “core imperialist” countries and their colonies, both external and internal.

For instance, I was surprised to see that Taxonomy excludes Puerto Rico from the category of “oppressed nations.” In fact, Puerto Rico, along with American Samoa and Guam, is said to “benefit” from its role as a dependency of the US. The underlying logic here appears to be that these colonies’ economic ties to the US, and, in some cases, access to US citizenship, makes them too intimately associated with a “core imperialist” country to be considered oppressed nations—even though their most intimate relationship is that of colonized and colonizer. The same thinking is applied to French colonies, as well: Taxonomy doesn’t consider Guadeloupe, Martinique, New Caledonia, or Réunion to be oppressed nations, because of their close ties to France. I think this approach minimizes the reality of national oppression in these colonies.

In fact, because of Taxonomy’s focus on aggregate country wealth and citizenship in analyzing imperialism, the essay ends up lumping together some oppressed nationalities with the people that rule over them. For example, Israeli Arabs, Druze, and Bedouin are considered to be “profiting from the imperialist order” just like the Zionist settlers. In other words, Taxonomy assigns these nationalities a role in the imperialist system primarily according to their *citizenship* of an imperialist *country*. But is Israeli citizenship (which was imposed on them by conquest) really the main determinant of their relationships to imperialism?

Along the same lines, Taxonomy treats US society as a virtual imperial monolith. All US citizens (except Native peoples) are considered to be part of an “imperialist core nation.” The “entire population” of the US is said to

“profit from the imperialist system.” This conflates captive nations with the settler population.

I disagree with this approach. The US can certainly be described as a wealthy *country*, with a powerful state, common citizenship, and defined borders. But actually, breaking it down, several *nations* live inside US territory. There’s a predatory white settler nation, which makes up roughly half of the population. There’s a New Afrikan people, welded into a nation over the course of generations of oppression. There’s a Mexicanx/Chicanx nation, living under occupation. There are numerous Indigenous nations, including Hawai’ians and Inuit.

All these oppressed nations (and other oppressed nationalities as well) have deep, antagonistic contradictions with the white settler nation and the US state. They’ve been occupied, colonized, exploited, repressed, and subjected to racist discrimination, mass incarceration, and genocide. Millions struggle with a legacy of slavery—not just Africans, but also Mexicanxs and Native people. Millions lack adequate nutrition and medical care today. Millions are currently imprisoned.

I’d argue that *national oppression and national resistance* are the main things that define these peoples’ relationship to imperialism—not the fact that they are formally citizens of the US, or that the US has high average wealth, or that the US as a *country* is part of an “imperialist core.”

It’s appropriate for Taxonomy to point out that imperial privilege flows (or trickles) down into the population of the wealthy countries, including among oppressed peoples. But that doesn’t change the fact that occupied nations’ role under imperialism is qualitatively different from the role of their oppressor-nation fellow citizens. I think putting them in the same category is a mistake.

Taxonomy seems to make a special exception for Native peoples: they are always classified as oppressed nations, no matter what their citizenship is or how many other ties they have with core imperialist countries. For example, you say that “*First Nations in the Americas ... have sometimes relatively privileged access to wealth and opportunity because of their partial integration into and/or their proximity to the imperialist core, but the nations themselves are denied self-determination and remain oppressed.*”

I basically agree with this (although I see bitter irony in Native people being viewed as privileged because of their “proximity” to the country that occupies them). I think the acknowledgment of Native peoples as oppressed nations

is correct. In this case, you clearly recognize that national oppression can outweigh citizenship in determining a social group's role in imperialism. But why isn't that same recognition applied to the other oppressed peoples occupied and colonized by the most powerful imperialist countries? I think it's vital not to underestimate the strength of these kinds of national contradictions, especially since the national liberation movements they generate play an important role in anti-imperialist struggle.

2. GLOBALIZATION

Another problem with relying on a taxonomy of *countries* to analyze imperialism is that monopoly capitalism has become increasingly globalized—meaning, increasingly *disconnected* from particular countries.

Again, I agree that individual countries are important units of imperialism. But the essay goes overboard on this score, seemingly dismissing imperialist globalization as an overhyped distraction. I don't agree; in fact I think Taxonomy's resistance to acknowledging globalization causes some theoretical blind spots.

It's notable, for instance, that Taxonomy doesn't discuss the European Union, or consider how its rise as a transnational capitalist collectivity affects the way imperialism is organized. Instead, it treats the various EU countries as separate imperial players, with each having a specified hierarchical role. The essay also doesn't consider the impact of major transnational institutions of imperialism like the IMF, WTO, and World Bank, which spearhead a neoliberal imperial agenda. You briefly mention what you call the imperialist "Triad" made up of a "united bloc" of countries at the heart of imperialism—North America, Western Europe, and Japan. But Taxonomy doesn't seem to ascribe any significance to that bloc's multinational and transcontinental character.

I would argue that globalization is an important aspect of modern imperialism. The pools of monopoly capital that sit at the top of the imperialist order carry out extensive investment, exploitation, and speculation on a transnational basis. Intent on pursuing their own corporate interests, their "loyalty" to individual home countries has decreased over time. Their business models are

global, going far beyond country vs. country competition or antagonism. They exploit giant populations of border-crossing labor and invest in a dense web of multinational industries and supply chains. They create transformative transnational trade treaties that include mechanisms for overruling nation-state laws. They systematically attack the regulations of individual countries, which are becoming weaker and weaker over time. In many cases they *manipulate* countries, borders, and governments rather than being defined or even restrained by them.

This trend is evident even within so-called state capitalism. State banks and “sovereign wealth funds” in China, Russia, and other places, are corruptly controlled by kleptocrat capitalists. They exist mainly to export capital, exploiting their way around the world just like the world’s “private” banks, with whom they often eagerly partner. The profits from their investments flow to oligarchs, who routinely stash the loot in offshore banks or real estate.

In an earlier era, imperialism was more territorially-based than it is today. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the monopoly capitalist trusts which seized control over resources and labor in colony after colony were deeply rooted in particular wealthy countries. The governments of those countries embodied and carried out the particular agendas of these capitalists. (For instance, the US violently intervened several times in Latin America to assist the United Fruit Company.) Although the trusts increasingly projected their imperial power overseas, most of them still depended heavily on their respective domestic economies as well. Imperialist states, serving as the main representatives of their home-grown capitalists, divided and redivided the lands of the colonial world, often through state versus state warfare. They directly installed colonial administrations or puppet governments. At the same time, capitalists groomed privileged populations in their home countries, creating corrupt social contracts. Things still work this way to some extent. But I don’t think this describes the main features or direction of the imperialist system today.

The old colonial system started to break down, especially after WWII, because colonized peoples rose up in every part of the world, threatening the entire imperial order. Imperialism survived, and was mostly able to beat back the challenge. But to do so it was forced to take new forms. I think that many radicals have failed to fully adjust to this.

Today imperialism no longer operates primarily through occupying armies or direct colonial administration. Although the threat of brutal repressive force

is always present (by means of country militaries, proxies, cops or mercenaries), monopoly capitalists' principal new vectors of exploitation aren't invasion and occupation. Instead, their main program is privatization; their main weapon is the stranglehold they exert over access to capital and world markets. Instead of relying primarily on colonial hierarchy and state-based territorial control, monopoly capital now thrives on financial blackmail, economic mobility, and chaos.

Countries still do a lot of imperialism's dirty work. But today the crucial functions of opening up new markets and cultivating local collaborators for monopoly capital are increasingly undertaken directly by corporations (e.g. Shell in Nigeria), or have been farmed out to non-state global institutions (like the World Bank). It's important to note that the main function of those local assets is no longer to serve as colonial representatives of a particular imperialist *country*. Rather, their main function overall is to advance a neoliberal agenda: to open up all possible economic resources—raw materials, agricultural and industrial commodities, women's bodies, services, land, crops, labor markets, water, genetic material—and to integrate them into a global marketplace, where those resources can be profitably harvested by monopoly capitalists.

As the role of countries in imperialism slowly weakens, privilege is no longer restricted to a few imperial "home" countries. It's being gradually reassigned in order to better serve the current flexible deployment of monopoly capital. Old "social contracts" in the Global North, like the "New Deal" in the US, are being gradually eroded, while middle classes are springing up in what used to be the colonies.

Globalization's advance doesn't imply that capitalists have abandoned national oppression, which is deeply entrenched and often still highly profitable. Nor does it mean that they've given up the cynical use of borders and governments as part of their tool kit. Those continue to be quite useful to them. Actually, the combination of border-crossing capital mobility, plus transnational workforces, plus carefully regimented borders, adds up to ideal conditions for imperialist exploiters.

I don't want to overstate the decline of countries. Despite the rise of transnational norms and institutions, we're still a long way from a fully globalized economy or a world government. Governments still play important roles. The internal politics of the US and other powerful countries can strongly affect the

course of world affairs, forcing even the largest capitalist groups to adjust their agendas. There are still state-initiated invasions and occupations, as we know.

I would also add that there are signs that the current wave of *rapid* globalization might be stalling. I strongly doubt that capitalism will ever return to the old form of country-centric imperialism. As a long-term trend, globalization seems inexorable. However, that process doesn't evolve in a straight line. A previous (narrower) wave of globalization that emerged early in the 20th century was cut short by economic crisis and a protectionist frenzy, followed by decades of xenophobia and inter-imperialist war. Could that happen again? The world economy is certainly vulnerable enough. It's become reliant on unsustainable debt, distorted by speculation, and threatened by huge asset bubbles. And of course xenophobia and protectionism are very much back in the news.

Still, whatever happens tomorrow, or in ten years, I think that it's crucial for us to understand the process of imperialist globalization, to study global imperialist institutions, and to bear in mind that monopoly capital has relative independence from individual countries. Treating imperialism as primarily a country vs. country matter clouds our view of its structure and internal logic.

3. IMPERIALISM IS CAPITALISM

Modern imperialism isn't mainly a policy choice, nor is it mainly the domination of certain countries by other countries. Rather, it's a world system—a dynamic, parasitic social organism that's endlessly regenerated by monopoly capitalism. Monopoly capitalism's internal contradictions drive it to penetrate, overrun, and overflow into every part of society and the earth. Imperialism's form has changed over time, but this fundamental drive has not. Your ideas and my ideas about this have a lot in common, but there seem to be some differences.

Taxonomy defines imperialism as “*a system where a conglomerate of capitalists, politicians, and security forces asserts control over a particular territory and its population to increase its own wealth. In order to establish its authority, it uses ideological means (racism), cultural means (proselytism), political means (direct or indirect colonialism), economic means (exploitation), and military means...*”

To me this seems to set out a somewhat instrumentalist narrative. It starts with a group of greedy powerful people (presumably the ruling class of a wealthy country) who decide to take over territories for profit. This group then *uses* things like racism, colonialism, exploitation, and other means to get their way.

It's unclear to me from this definition how we are supposed to comprehend imperialism as an evolving *world system*. The imperialism that we are both struggling to analyze goes far beyond the schemes and predations of particular groups of greedy men (even though certain people obviously profit from it and should be held accountable for their crimes). Imperialism isn't fundamentally about one or another conglomerate "asserting itself" or "using means" to rip off "territories and their populations." It isn't just a pathology of one or more countries, either. It's something deeper: a metastasis of capitalism on a world scale.

There have been many kinds of empires throughout history, with different characteristics. But the world system we live under today—modern imperialism—is the result of capitalism's expansionist dynamic. (Exploitation, in my opinion, is *integral* to this dynamic; it isn't a *means* to establish authority over territory.) Historically, specific groups of capitalists have opportunistically participated in the imperialist process, but no particular capitalists are necessary for that process to continue. As imperialism expands, it evolves to assume certain social forms, which change over time. (Colonialism is one of those forms. It isn't a *means* for promoting imperial authority so much as an *incarnation* of imperialism.)

Even if we leave aside the issue of globalization, we should avoid identifying imperialism too closely with seizing or controlling territory. Imperialism has always transcended territory in important ways. For instance, as you mention at one point, gender oppression is a core feature of imperialism. So is the drive to commodify everything—including, today, water, outer space, information, sex, and genetic material. These essential aspects of imperialist parasitism aren't confined to specific countries. Rather, they are general characteristics of all modern imperialism, elaborations of its capitalist birthright.

In my opinion, rather than being essentially territorial, *modern imperialism is a world system defined by the contradiction between pools of monopoly capital, on the one hand, and varied, overlapping populations of exploited humanity, on the other*. Monopoly capital by its nature strains to constantly expand on all fronts, repeatedly transcending territorial, social, biological, and cultural

borders of all kinds. This expansion happens through multiple pathways, on numerous levels. As it evolves, monopoly capital adopts particular concrete modes of oppression to enable the process of resource theft and exploitation. (For instance, white supremacist national oppression played a key role in imperial expansion in North America.) Imperialism, understood as monopoly capitalism, commodifies everything it touches, striving to make everything marketable—even the air we breathe.

On the other side of this fundamental contradiction, exploited humanity comprises not just poor countries, but also oppressed nations, women and other oppressed genders, the world proletariat and other classes, and various marginalized sectors. The monopoly capitalist system moves parasitically against these populations at particular times, in different ways, while simultaneously fostering privilege for other populations.

With few exceptions, we are all part of the imperialist system, which is basically, in my view, how human society is organized in our time. We all participate in some manner, whether we are exploiter or exploited, oppressor or oppressed, victim and/or recipient of privilege. To me, anti-imperialism means struggling from within that system to stop participating, to carve out anti-imperialist spaces, and to overthrow the death grip of monopoly capitalism in all its varied forms.

I don't agree with your comment that studying monopoly capitalism as a system is an "economic approach" to analyzing imperialism. I would say that it's actually a more political approach than categorizing countries. By studying monopoly capital as a *system* driven by a deep *contradiction*, we can understand how classes, nations, countries, genders, and oppressed groups arise, and how they are now objectively situated in society, both in relation to the capitalists and in relation to each other. We can analyze not just the *results* of imperialism, such as income inequality, but also the underlying *forces* of imperialism which drive those results.

I'll offer a current example.

Rural women in the colonial world have always been a key source of profit for imperialism. Until recently, they toiled mainly on small farms under the proximate ownership and supervision of male relatives. From the high level perspective of monopoly capital, exploitation was organized through an elaborate pyramid, partly inherited from feudalism, that included multiple layers of

middlemen—family members, rich landowners, officials, processors, wholesalers, distributors, colonial administrators, local loan sharks, clergy, cops and other gangsters, various levels of banks, etc. Colonial women’s labor was so profitable that, even though each of these middlemen took a cut along the way, the exploitation of rural women still generated massive wealth for finance capital, sitting at the top of the pyramid.

But now, because of changing economic and political realities, the largest pools of monopoly capitalism are finding it advantageous to leave “peasant” farming behind. Factory farming and global agricultural markets have finally come of age, assisted by radical new transportation and information technologies, pioneered by the “green revolution,” and financed by powerful transnational consortia of investors. Simultaneously, new global capitalist industries are eagerly seeking to exploit women’s labor and bodies. They are prepared to do this more directly, instead of through the ages-old mediation of family patriarchs and traditional rural institutions. As a result of these changes in monopoly capitalism, rural women, streaming out of the countryside of the world, are being regrouped into giant flexible border-crossing labor pools. This is happening on a massive scale, fueling the largest wave of migration in history. Imperialism has systematically and relentlessly busted hundreds of millions of rural women out of family farming, pushing them into globe-spanning service industries, massive free trade manufacturing zones, and super-scale corporate agriculture. These working-class women are just as exploited as before, but in a radically new form.

In this transformational process, traditional rural patriarchy—which was one of the main pillars of colonialism—is being dismantled, while local economic and social networks are being disrupted. This shift has huge implications for the proletariat (and other classes), for women, for nations, for cities.

The destruction of traditional rural patriarchy by neoliberal globalization has created the conditions for new kinds of struggle, both reactionary and revolutionary. On the Right, we already witness the international rise of misogynist reactionary populism. Imperialism’s new incarnation has infuriated millions of dispossessed men, who feel that they are losing “their” women to faceless global corporations, and who often find themselves marginalized in the new economy. On the Left, there’s the potential for a reconfigured, global, cosmopolitan, women-centered proletarian movement—a modern protagonist in the long struggle against capital.

There's nothing I know of with larger political ramifications. But we can't grasp this sea change in world society by making country vs. country comparisons. We need to center our theoretical focus on the system of monopoly capital, its continuous evolution, and the multifaceted resistance it engenders.

As I see it, monopoly capital and its victims are each being deeply transformed year after year, while most radical theory straggles far behind. To catch up, I think we have to study both sides of the imperialist contradiction today—looking not just at the re-organization of monopoly capital, but also at the changing configuration of imperialism's exploited populations. I think this will require, among other things, formulating a new class analysis. We should also try to understand imperialism's trajectory—where it's headed. Finally, to echo one of your points, we need to determine—as other revolutionaries did in their times—where the weak links are in contemporary monopoly capitalism: where we can attack most effectively.

This adds up to a daunting theoretical project, which will probably take many years. But difficult or not, we badly need to modernize our understanding of imperialism, using what we already know and what we can learn from practice and study. Opening up this subject for discussion is a great benefit of your essay.

Despite my differences with Taxonomy, I think we have a common intent. I think we both consider the elite fraction of the capitalist class that directs and controls capital's parasitic expansion to be our enemy. We both hate the inequality imperialism fosters. And we both identify privilege as a material basis for widespread complicity in imperialist oppression. For radicals, those principles applied a hundred years ago, and they still apply, even though monopoly capitalism is organized differently than before, wields its capital and power along changed pathways, and distributes privilege in new ways.

Thanks again for your essay.

Comradely,
Bromma
February 2018



POSTSCRIPT

Dear Bromma,

Many thanks for your thoughtful comments on my essay. They point out shortcomings, fill in gaps, and challenge me to sharpen my position.

There is only one thing I'd like to respond to directly. It concerns your first point about countries, nations, and citizens. You touch on sensitive issues, and I want to avoid being misunderstood.

Oppressed nations need to lead the struggle against imperialism. If, in Taxonomy, I have overlooked or miscategorized oppressed nations, it is my fault and needs to be corrected. I do not believe that members of these nations are “privileged” in the imperialist order. When I say that they have “relatively privileged access to wealth and opportunity because of their partial integration into and/or their proximity to the imperialist core,” I don't mean the same. I appreciate that this might seem like nit-picking, and I am sure that it could have been phrased better, but I was trying to spotlight the complexities (and, perhaps, “bitter ironies”) the imperialist system entails, which, I believe, we need to account for if we want to understand the system properly. It was one of the intentions of Taxonomy to bring attention to its many gray zones and layers—not out of academic zeal, but because I think it is required to reflect on viable possibilities to overcome it.

The specific weight that factors such as national affiliation, citizenship, mobility, income, and others should be granted in sketching a taxonomy of imperialism is hard to assess. I have no answer. But allow me to use a concrete example in order to illustrate a reality that, I believe, must be reflected in some way.

Among the French national soccer team that won the Men's World Cup in 1998 was Christian Karembeu, a player born on the remote Melanesian island of Lifou, which belongs to the French overseas territory of New Caledonia. Like his team mates, Karembeu became a millionaire playing soccer and entered the upper echelons of European society. His career, entirely dependent on the inclusion of New Caledonia into the French empire, shapes the dreams and ambitions of the youth of New Caledonia, while it is largely irrelevant for the young people of the Melanesian islands that compose the independent states of Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, or Papua New Guinea. It is evident that such a difference, together with the access to better-paying jobs and far superior educational facilities and health services, impacts the consciousness of the New Caledonian people.

It is also evident that the strength of independence movements in French overseas territories largely depends on the material resources available in the respective territory. Simply put, the less unlikely a strong independent economy is and the more reliant the territories' relative wealth is on the subsidies of the *métropole* (as France is aptly called in the overseas territories), the weaker the independence movement. A main reason for the relatively strong independence movement in New Caledonia, for example, lies in the large nickel reserves that make a strong independent economy seem possible. In French Polynesia, on the other hand, the lack of economic resources has been a major factor in the independence movement never garnering mass support. We could go through a long list of internal and external colonies and find similar patterns.

I agree that "occupied nations' role under imperialism is qualitatively different from the role of their oppressor-nation fellow citizens," and that "putting them in the same category is a mistake." But I think it is also a mistake to assume that all of the oppressed occupy just one category.

I think what we agree upon is that imperialism must be overcome to make the world a better place, and that our attempts to analyze the imperialist order are based on this desire, with all the inevitable bumps and wrong turns they include. Thanks again for your important contributions.

Comradely,
Gabriel
March 2018



POST-POSTSCRIPT

Dear Gabriel,

I agree that sometimes we need to make distinctions even among the oppressed. But those distinctions should be made with care.

I objected when *Taxonomy* put a whole swath of colonies—including New Caledonia—in the category of “Imperialist Nations,” placing them side by side with wealthy non-colonies and settler imperialist populations. I thought this made a questionable distinction among the oppressed.

Now, in your postscript, you make another distinction. You argue that the strength or weakness of independence movements mainly depends on their level of wealth, and, in particular, on how many material resources they receive from the colonizing power. You strongly imply that independence movements in some French colonial territories are destined to be weaker than in others, since they get fewer “subsidies” from the metropolis. You propose this as a general pattern found around the world.

I find this distinction questionable too. Your argument seems to rely on economic determinism. It doesn’t correspond with the actual history of national liberation movements. And, most important, it fails to acknowledge the basically *political* character of those movements.

The fundamental purpose of anti-imperialist independence movements isn’t gaining more wealth, but *self-determination*. Independence represents full autonomy from the colonial powers—a radical step towards freedom. Since the relationship between colonizer and colony is *inherently oppressive*, political friction and resistance are constantly renewed, even in situations where colonized

populations don't experience absolute poverty.

People may embrace national liberation struggles partly because of poverty, of course. But also because of land and resource theft, genocide, discrimination, mass incarceration, cultural suppression, lack of political power, environmental destruction, and for many more reasons.

With so many issues in play, an independence movement's political strength or weakness is bound to be a combination of multiple factors—social, economic, political, and military. There are *practical* reasons for the success or failure of independence movements too, including leadership capacity, level of unity, access to training and arms, availability of rear base areas, and contradictions within the enemy. Imperialists may try to buy off leaders or sectors of the colonial population, but that's only one aspect of a complex struggle, and, in my opinion, rarely the decisive aspect.

There's no direct correspondence between standard of living and the hunger for self-determination. We know that strong independence movements—for instance the New Afrikan freedom struggle, the Northern Irish struggle, and numerous Indigenous movements—can rise up even inside relatively wealthy countries. Puerto Rico has always had a very active independence movement, even though the island has gotten more social benefits and investment than many other colonies. (It's obvious now how undependable those were.)

I hope we get to follow up on these kinds of important questions, and that more anti-imperialists will join the worthwhile discussion that you started.

Comradely,

Bromma

3/24/18

GABRIEL KUHN

Gabriel Kuhn is an Austrian-born author-activist living in Sweden. He is the editor of the book *Turning Money Into Rebellion: The Unlikely Story of Denmark's Revolutionary Bank Robbers*, published by Kersplebedeb and PM Press.

BROMMA

Bromma is a U.S.-based activist and writer. He is the author of the Kersplebedeb publications *The Worker Elite: Notes on the 'Labor Aristocracy, Exodus and Reconstruction: Working-Class Women at the Heart of Globalization*, and *Racist 'Anti-Imperialism'? Class, Colonialism and the Zapatistas*.

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