

# Twenty Points on the Imperialism Discussion

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On the state of the discussion

1. In the very weak state the IBT now finds itself in, our failure to either resolve the argument about Russian imperialism or to set it aside for the time being threatens to be a critical blow to the organisation. The silence of many comrades is probably reflective of a sense that the stakes are very high here.
2. The debate so far may have clarified the issues in the minds of some of the participants, but I don't think it has clarified the issues for many.
3. Either a sense of extreme urgency or a sense of the need for great forbearance are quite understandable. Though I take the position of forbearance, I respect the contrary view of it.

On Tsarist Russia

4. An earlier stage of this discussion involved focussing on whether Russia in the period prior to 1917 was imperialist, with those who argued that Russia **now** is not imperialist seeking to show that Russia **then** was not imperialist. It was clear to us all, I think, that Russia in that period was rather similar in its place in the world to Russia today. We seem now to have come to agreement that Russia was **then** imperialist, but apparently some of us have simultaneously come to the view that the role of Russia in the world then, and the role of Russia in the world today are very different. In fact Russia today is in very much the same international role, though actually **more** of an independent imperialist factor than it was before the 1917 Revolution
5. The observation that the conditions for Russia's imperialist-like role today were created while it was a degenerated workers state (ie **before** it was imperialist this time around) do not seem to advance the discussion. It is always the case that most of the conditions of imperialism are created in the pre-imperialist history of a given country.

On the Leninist theory of imperialism

6. We began our debate on the status of contemporary Russia by discussing a range of factors: economic development, the presence of finance capital, the independence of the Russian bourgeoisie, geo-political weight and so on. The comrades who argue against Russia's imperialist status (most particularly Tom [Riley]) tended to push on the question of economic development, reduced even to matter of organic composition of capital (which itself was used to frame what remained of the other subjects, e.g. finance capital). So the discussion became a bit narrow, as other comrades (most particularly Josh [Decker]) responded by attacking the points on which the other side believed they were strongest. This was normal and understandable, and in fact quite useful, but the recent trajectory of the debate has taken us away from other factors that dialectically contribute to the whole picture.

7. There has been some discussion of whether a multi-factoral or a uni-factoral analysis should be applied in this discussion. I suspect that our predecessors would be amused; they were not much into factors, or empiricism, or reductionism. To gain some perspective and mental peace I've been reading a little Labriola, Plekhanov, and Lenin's philosophical notebooks. What impresses me is the centrality for them of the totality of a phenomenon.

8. It is notable that conversations rooted in quantitative data about whether a given country was or was not imperialist do not seem to have occurred among Leninists in Lenin's lifetime. The data in Lenin's *Imperialism* is focused on how imperialism works, not on proving certain countries to be imperialist – that is taken for granted. This is doubtless because our predecessors were aware that establishing the imperialist nature of a country is a matter of qualitative as well as quantitative analysis. Despite the difficulties with quantitative analysis, it is nevertheless usually fairly clear which countries are imperialist. It would be difficult to find accounting indicators showing New Zealand, as one extreme example, to be imperialist, yet it is uncontroversially clear that New Zealand is the little finger in the Anglophone imperialist fist, and as a result enjoys imperialist conditions of life.

9. We may all agree that a state is imperialist if it benefits in the long run from superprofits transferred from other countries, but the modes of transfer of superprofits are so varied, sometimes so complex, and often so indirect, that it is extremely difficult to establish or quantify superprofits. Foreign Direct Investment flows may be a better indicator (though insufficient and problematic) — they would seem to rate Russia among the lesser of the clearly imperialist countries.

10. The argument that Russia is not imperialist because its economy is overwhelmingly dominated by extractive industry is another form of the argument that imperialism equates to a high level of industrial technique, or a high organic composition of capital. Now at a certain level of abstraction, there is a truth in that. Imperialism as an historical world system is in fact associated with a high organic composition of capital, but at the level of individual countries combined and uneven development can render some imperialist countries with a relatively low overall organic composition of capital.

11. The argument that Russia's protectionist policies disqualify it as imperialist holds no weight. The USA has considerable protectionist barriers, particularly in the agricultural sector.

12. Likewise the argument that an open banking system is the *sine qua non* of imperialism is dubious. Until 1994 not only was branch banking by foreign banks impossible or very difficult in the USA, even interstate branch banking was illegal. And even currently US citizens and residents may make deposits only of amounts **over \$100,000** in a foreign bank branch in the USA.

<<http://www.ny.frb.org/aboutthefed/fedpoint/fed26.html>>

13. One criterion for imperialism—the key criterion—is the rule of finance capital. We are agreed on this, but whether or not finance capital **rules** cannot be established by any accounting methods, but only by qualitative analysis.

14. The argument that there is no finance capital in Russia, or that it is uninfluential is plainly spurious. While much finance capital in Russia is an aspect of the self-financing extractive

conglomerates, banking finance is also highly significant. In the period of privatising the economy which followed the Russian counter-revolution there was a burgeoning of banks, with every major player having their own bank for some time (for the purpose of consolidating smaller parcels of capital under their own control). Since then there has been a radical reduction of the number of banks and an increase in their size and power, and a more complete fusion between banking, industrial and extractive capital. Finance capital in Russia (like most things in Russia) is largely unsophisticated, but it is extremely powerful. Putin is its preeminent representative. He is leader of the Russian state ***for the purpose of making decisions serving the interests of the topmost layer of Russian finance capital.***

On Russia's role in the world

15. Our understanding of imperialism leads us to expect a world characterised by disputes between imperialists, with disputes between imperial powers and non-imperial powers being local, and generally relatively short-lived.

16. We understand the subordination of those disputes in the period of the deformed workers states, but that period is now twenty years past, and the United States maintains a strong hegemony among most imperialist players. It is almost as if some kind of super-imperialism has, after all, come to pass. But that hegemony does not extend to Russia.

17. The polarity between the USA and Russia is the central feature of international politics today, and promises to be so for some time. The truth of it is that Russia competes with US imperialism as no other country does. The role that Russia played recently in brokering a deal over Syrian chemical weapons indicates that very clearly. The attempt to relegate Russia in world affairs to the status of Brazil or India flies in the face of reality.

18. A very high proportion of United States imperialist war efforts since the Second World War, and certainly since the fall of the Soviet Union, has been about acquiring and manipulating for its own benefit the largest possible share of world energy supplies. Besides a generalised fight for world domination, the fight for energy is the accepted central objective of US imperialism—and also Russian imperialism. (Neither, incidentally, has a substantial influence on the world price of hydrocarbon fuels.)

19. If in fact Russia is not imperialist, then our anti-imperialism is fated to mostly be anti-Americanism. If that is the case, so be it. But it would be a reality in which we would find difficulty transcending a rather crude programme.

20. The Syrian conflict had the makings of a US-Russia proxy war, though it never rose to that level, and the organisation as a whole was able to accept a common position: defeatist on both sides of the civil war, and Assad regime defencist in the event of a US-led attack. Comrades must consider the programmatic meaning of our characterisation of Russia. In the event of a war between the US and Russia (abstracting from the question of each power's alliances), do comrades suppose it would be in the interest of the international working class to raise the call "Defend Russia Against US Imperialism", given everything we know about the role Russia plays in the global capitalist system?