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EDITORIAL

Imperialism and Africa

> It is an irony of history that coercion, which is so effective that it can afford to be silent, is scarcely recognised as such; it is only on occasions when its effectiveness is diminished to a point where it has to come out in the ugliest of colours that its reality begins to strike us. The deafening silence about imperialism … is thus a reflection of the extraordinary strength and vigour it is displaying at present.
>
> Prabhat Patnaik, 'Whatever Has Happened to Imperialism?'[1]

This 50th anniversary issue of the *Review of African Political Economy* (ROAPE) focuses on imperialism in the African context and beyond. It reminds readers of the structural underpinning to the world economy that produces and reproduces inequality, poverty, war and famine and yet is omitted from almost all analysis of Africa. This editorial interrogates what imperialism is, how it may have changed, and with what consequences. We do this by exploring some of the recurrent themes that ROAPE and its authors have advanced over 50 years of academic activist engagement with Africa's political economy. Furthermore, this 50th anniversary issue deals specifically with the politics of knowledge production and how the journal managed to separate itself from a corporate publishing house to ensure free and genuinely open access for all its readers. The control of how knowledge is generated and access to it is facilitated is a key dimension of imperialism, and this journal contests this aspect of imperialist hegemony.

Our critical commentary on imperialism in this anniversary issue explores the crises of social reproduction and gender inequality that underpin late capitalism in crisis. We also examine the shifting debate about the international (imperialist) labour migration regime; French imperialism in West and Central Africa; and imperialist intervention in North Africa. In addition, the struggles for people's power are examined with reference especially to South Africa. A founding editor reflects on why and how ROAPE emerged as a radical journal on African political economy and recent debate about knowledge production in and about Africa. There are also a number of reader reflections on the history of ROAPE, what the journal has meant to some activists, what ROAPE may have done reasonably well in the last 50 years and what it might do better.

Correction: A sentence in this editorial was amended to address a typographical error on page 365, when the year 2023 was wrongly written as 2022.

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Imperialism

Imperialism is a global system of surplus value extraction through unequal exchange between the North and the Third World. Surplus value is distributed unequally determined by class, race and gender and the power of the imperial triad of the United States, the European Union and Japan (Amin 1974; Harb 2024, 15). Capital does not leave any part of the globe untouched: capitalism as a global system subjugates, and the 'subjugation of the people of the periphery ... is an integral part of its modus operandi' (Patnaik and Patnaik 2017, 141). Historical capitalism is a global phenomenon in which imperialism is embedded. This argument was part of a fundamental contribution made by Samir Amin which featured in ROAPE's first issue (1974). Amin's model of global accumulation of capital highlighted two patterns of development. First, in capitalism's centre, where the dominant economic activity tries to satisfy mass consumer needs and the demand for production goods. Second, there are peripheral systems dominated by the production (and limited import) of luxury goods and exports restricted and shaped by the lack of an internal market (*ibid.*, 9). Accumulation of capital in the core often enlisted the complicity of its working class in helping to subordinate peripheral capitalism and, in the process, among other things produced a racialised and racist view of the world: the rational and efficient North versus an undeveloped, lazy and indolent South. This global system is therefore polarising but it is not immutable (Amin 2019). The core–periphery structure is mediated by a range of classes that include in the core an imperialist bourgeoise and a proletariat; and in the periphery a dependent bourgeoisie and a working class, but also socially differentiated peasantries and persistent non-capitalist modes of production. These themes were discussed at length as part of a dedicated ROAPE issue on the work of Samir Amin (Kvangraven et al. 2021).

Amin developed Lenin's theory of imperialism that was characterised by the dominance of the export of capital by nineteenth-century monopolies in chemicals, engineering manufactures and trade (Lenin 1975). Lenin's view was that imperialism was shaped by the historical tendency of the concentration and centralisation of capital and it was the highest stage of capitalism. Weary of definitions for being unable to embrace the historical complexities of social, political and economic processes, Lenin nevertheless argued that imperialism had five basic features:

> 1) the concentration of production and capital has developed to such a high stage that it has created monopolies which play a decisive role in economic life; 2) the merging of bank capital with industrial capital, and the creation, on the basis of this 'finance capital', of a financial oligarchy; 3) the export of capital as distinguished from the export of commodities acquires exceptional importance; 4) the formation of international monopolist capitalist associations, which share the world among themselves and 5) the territorial division of the whole world among the biggest capitalist powers is completed. (Lenin 1975, 106)

While it is often overlooked, one of Lenin's enduring legacies was 'the tremendous significance of Africa in both the global political economy and the struggle for human freedom' (Pateman 2022, 300; see also Joffre-Eichhorn and Anderson 2024).

The mechanics of imperialism and the role of some of its main actors have changed since the turn of the twentieth century. The 'territorial division of the whole world among the biggest capitalist powers' for example has been challenged by struggles for national liberation and decolonisation yet, as Samir Amin often noted, the importance of Marxism

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was its method of analysis and action, not 'as a group of propositions drawn from use of that method' (Amin 2019, 405). His theory of imperialism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries was still shaped by the monopolies of the imperial triad in weapons of mass destruction, technology, financial flows and their control, planetary resources, communications and their infrastructure (see also Abdel-Malek 2008 [1977]). But the dominance of these monopolies has shifted towards the management of war and waste. As we note below, imperialism continues to be a structural relationship where unequal exchange ensures value added to the economies of the triad. This follows the continued asymmetry between tropical and temperate regions where Northern capitalism relies on the access to commodities that it cannot produce, where it does not (yet) have substitutes, tropical fruits and vegetables, edible oils and fibres and where production depends on small-scale farmers and the persistence of pre-capitalist relations of production (Patnaik and Patnaik 2017, 147). And there is a recent increase in the role played by artisanal small-scale miners in accessing rare metals, cobalt and lithium in the Democratic Republic of Congo for Western clean energy and transport infrastructures (Radley 2023).

> This asymmetry has two implications. First, obtaining a large range of goods that simply could not be produced in the temperate regions from the tropical landmass, and doing so in growing quantities because of capital accumulation, was, and remains, a perennial necessity for capitalism. And if increasing supply price is to be avoided, then there is no alternative to obtaining such goods at the expense of their local absorption. This, in short, remains a perennial feature of capitalism. (Patnaik and Patnaik 2017, 147)

This value transfer to Northern-based multinational corporations (MNCs) and financial-sector service and banking institutions results from among other things the payment of wage rates in Africa and elsewhere at less than the costs of social reproduction. The contemporary period, however, is driven less by capitalists crudely intensifying the rate of exploitation, lengthening working days and advancing 'super exploitation'. Imperialism is now driven by especially US financial and military class interests that seek to ameliorate the crisis of late capitalism by advancing a win–win strategy of waste production, militarism and war-related accumulation. War is now a market for the production and reproduction of imperial hegemony and a leading capitalist sector (Capasso and Kadri 2023).

Herein lies a partial explanation for the persistent role that force and violence plays in the subjugation of radical African voices and social movements. Accumulation by dispossession was seen by Marx as a (short-term) process at the early formative period of primitive accumulation. Yet it is a persistent and systemic feature of imperialism. Dispossession and control of local producers is a means by which global capitalism imposes income deflation on the periphery. In addition to promoting law and order, the securitisation of producers ensures that supplies of 'tropical goods (and temperate goods in winter) can be obtained by the capitalist sector without any threat of an increasing supply price' (Patnaik and Patnaik 2017, 148). The most compelling articles in the history of this journal have focused on historically shaped relations of the 'central contradiction of imperialism and national and social revolutions' (Abdel-Malek 2008 [1977], 129). These 'revolutions' go beyond particular accounts of social and political struggles for the liberation of South Africa, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea Bissau and Namibia, many of which have been reflected in some detail in ROAPE. Many critically engaged accounts with various struggles around resources, land and extractives, MNCs and financialisation have not prioritised a view of national liberation at their core. Yet the strengths of ROAPE are evident around the debates of imperialism and

political struggles that have strived to counter the policies of local elites and metropolitan capitalist interests (Ajl 2018, 2021). Many articles may have been overfocused on narrative accounts of 'big issues' – variously, corruption, economic reform (issue nos. 47 and 63), democracy (nos. 49 and 54), mining (nos. 12, 168 and 173), gender (no. 149), the environment (nos. 74 and 177–178) and religion (52).[2] These themes have often been sandwiched too briefly in between analyses as to *why* the deleterious consequences of underdevelopment took the form that they did. ROAPE has not favoured a template of what struggles should and should not be supported in Africa but some of the most analytically engaged articles have explored elements of an agenda mapped in the 'genuine dialectical pattern [of] inter-relations between hegemonic imperialism and anti-hegemonic national liberation movements' (Abdel-Malek 2008 [1977], 129; in ROAPE see, inter alia, Allen 1995).

ROAPE and imperialism

A recurrent theme in ROAPE has been the role of imperialism in undermining African sovereignty and independence (inter alia, Zeilig 2014). The founding editors noted in the first editorial of the issue, in which Amin explained his theoretical model of accumulation and development:

> This review is published with the express intent of providing a counterweight to that mass of literature on Africa which holds: that Africa's continuing *chronic poverty is primarily an internal problem and not a product of her colonial history and her present dependence*; that the successful attraction of foreign capital and the consequent production within the confines of the international market will bring development; and that the major role in achieving development must be played by western-educated, 'modernizing' elites who will bring progress to the 'backward' masses. (ROAPE 1974, 1, emphasis added)

The editorial continued to indict leaders who inherited power at independence, confirming Frantz Fanon's description of them as 'spoilt children of yesterday's colonialism and of today's national governments'. The founding editors of ROAPE promised a journal that would be dedicated to the task of

> understanding, and countering, the debilitating consequences of a capitalism which stems from external domination and exploitation and is combined with internal underdeveloped and equally exploitative structures. … Class analysis should also be indicating the prospects for transformation and in particular isolating the class alliances that will have to be generated and the approach to their struggle with the entrenched interests maintaining underdevelopment (ROAPE 1974, 7–8).

The 1970s were heady years of optimistic engagement with national liberation movements, offering solidarity and support for struggles against South African racism and victory against Portuguese fascism in Lisbon and its forced removal from lusophone Africa. Early issues of the journal were thus inflections on the rise of new capitalist dynamics of transnational capital, the roles and impact of multinational corporations, debates on neo-colonialism and the state (issue nos. 2 to 5) and whether there was capitalism in Africa (nos. 8, 14, 22 and 23), and intense debate about liberation in southern Africa (nos. 11 and 18).

Self-criticism by the editorial working group (see, for example, issue no. 32 from 1985) was often evident in early issues – something that diminished in the pages of later volumes.

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Early optimism of engagement with revolutionary moments of struggle was replaced and very soon overtaken by the crisis of late capitalism and its calamitous impact throughout the continent. ROAPE has been focused almost continuously on analysing the crisis of capitalism and the different dimensions of how imperialism has subordinated chances for progressive movements and sovereignty. Many early issues thus centred on structural adjustment, poverty reduction papers and the role that the World Bank and International Monetary Fund played in imposing the will of international capital in Africa. The declared early self-importance of ROAPE's initial suggestion of its role in 'devising strategy for Africa's revolution' gave way to developing critiques of capitalism and its slump, the restructuring that followed in the 1980s and 1990s and the enhanced role of the imperial triad in setting parameters for African liberation. The journal was also keen, in its retrospect and prospect after 10 years of publishing, to explore 'which classes constitute friends and enemies of [the] revolutionary process' (ROAPE 1985, issue no. 32, 6) in the struggle for socialism in Africa. Editors noted in the same issue that they had perhaps been 'simplistic' and 'naively ambitious' in seeing African development in terms of armed liberation struggle or neo-colonialism. Nevertheless, there has always been an optimism regarding how socialism can be developed and by which social forces (inter alia, issue numbers 139 (2014); 69 (1996); 77 (1998); 96 (2003); 127 (2011); and 155 (2018)).

ROAPE has reported on the shifts in the character of imperialism since the early 1970s (issue nos. 32 (1985); 38 (1987); 50 (1991); 66 (1995); 77 (1998); 80 (1999); 95 (2003); 102 (2004); 103 (2005); 104/105 (2005); 113 (2007); and 132 (2012)). It has done so mostly to explore the impact of imperialism, which big issues have highlighted capitalism in crisis, and how it is evidenced in Africa. In doing this the journal's archive is a stockpile of academic and activist reportage on Africa's struggles with class forces that mostly emanate from the global core but are not always reducible to it. In other words, ROAPE contributors have explored not simply the *dynamics* of imperialism from the global North but also how capital accumulation under imperialism has been historically mediated by African classes. As Bracking and Harrison noted in ROAPE issue 95,

> clearly capitalism continues its expansion and deepening across and within space, but its social forms are *diverse and historically-constituted*, not derivative of a form of 'metropolitan' capitalism, no matter how strongly they might be influenced by the latter. (Bracking and Harrison 2003, 7, emphasis in original)

Bracking and Harrison put paid to any notion that became popular among bourgeois commentators after the fall of the Berlin Wall: that there was a post-imperial world order. They listed five ongoing features of imperialism noted by Fred Halliday (2002) which were similar to the analysis of Amin regarding the inexorable expansion of capitalism as a socio-economic system on a world scale: the role of capitalist competition, the continuous drive for expansion and resulting war, and persistent reproduction of inequalities on a world scale (Bracking and Harrison 2003, 7). It is important to note that imperialism is not simply or cannot be reduced to territorial control or occupation by economically powerful states – although that also continues, and powerful US economic interests do imperil African sovereignty. Imperialism 'is not, and has never been, a static and unchanging reality of power and domination' (Wai 2014, 491). It has a powerful ideological underpinning that elevates Western culture and history as being universally hegemonic and in so doing continues Western post-Second World War racialised modernisation theory: that the West shows itself as an exemplar to Africa to help it emulate a particular pattern of modernity.

While there have been continuities in how imperialism plays out, not just in Africa, there have also been several important discontinuities and of course resistance to it. Put simply, the US has difficulty in maintaining global hegemony in the twenty-first century.

There is now 'a period of flux for imperialism' (Ghosh 2021, 9). US hegemony is challenged by its defeats in Afghanistan and Iraq. And while the US is chastened by the Ukraine political leadership for stalling and not immediately meeting demands for materiel, it may be that elites in Washington desire to extend and deepen the consequences of Russia's 'special military operation' for as long as it can – and benefit financially in the process. War is good for business. The US is certainly keen in its support for genocide in Palestine and critical of South Africa's leading role in the case brought against Israel in the International Criminal Court. The presence of US military in West Africa is also challenged in Niger, where Washington has been forced to withdraw more than 1,000 military personnel (Tait 2024). This does not mean that the global system and financial architecture of capitalism is immediately imperilled, although the rise of the BRICS bloc of nations is often written up in that way (inter alia, Chakraborty 2018; Chatterjee and Naka 2022; Duggan, Ladines Azalia and Rewizorski 2022). Neither does it mean that US militarism is less evident or violent, either directly or through its proxies. And it also does not immediately imply that African states can easily and quickly develop sovereign national projects. It means, instead, that opposition and resistance to US economic and military intervention are intense; that imperialism does not easily meet the interests of large financial capital; and that the ideological mask of the US (and EU) – in promoting growth in Africa, and elsewhere, while declaring concern for poverty reduction – has been exposed as a patronising agenda of self-justification and the status quo. It has also meant a more expansive and broader definition of imperialist interest in advancing control over economic territory. Attempts to generalise control over African resources, often in competition with China, have accelerated in the twenty-first century, and so too has the capitalist impulse to commodify all aspects of human activity, including basic amenities and social services (Ghosh 2021, 10).

Imperialism and war

Mainstream discourse about Africa, poverty, conflict and war continues to invest hope and support for Western investment to resolve the contemporary continental debt and financial crisis. The African Development Bank notes a number of recent external shocks – conflict in Ukraine, post- Covid-19 recovery and subdued global growth – as having an impact on Africa's economic performance. The horrors of the continent's economic and social malaise are much reported and of course heavily felt by workers and farmers in Africa. The average debt to GDP ratio in sub-Saharan Africa 'almost doubled in just a decade – from 30% at the end of 2013 to almost 60% … by the end of 2022' (Comeli et al. 2023). But since 2010 public debt in sub-Saharan Africa has more than tripled – it is now in excess of US$1.14 trillion (World Bank 2023). Countries have tried to finance the difficulty in providing even modest public service provision by increasing public debt. That has led to historically high fiscal crises of the state – the gap between income and expenditure. More worrying, however, is the composition of sub-Saharan Africa's debt. After the 2008 financial crisis, African countries were encouraged to borrow at much higher rates of interest than was hitherto the case and to borrow from private lenders. An increasing and higher element of the continent's debt

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is now owed to private equity investors and banks than has ever hitherto been the case. The move away from bilateral and multilateral borrowing is more costly and precarious, with heavy penalties for default. In eastern and southern Africa, for example, the private sector now accounts for at least 19% of regional financing as countries secure funds from international markets by issuing bonds, as has been the case in Kenya and Rwanda (Prasad, Sedlo and Allen Massingue 2022). Foreign capital continues to be seen as a panacea to supplement African domestic investments' liquidity, but servicing external debts often requires further borrowing which keeps the financial system in place (Sylla and Sundaram 2024). A counter to this has been Chinese financing for development, a worry for the international financial institutions as they have little accurate knowledge of the extent of this, and, unlike Western donors, China does not impose conditionalities on its lending and debt relief. In April 2024 China cancelled an unspecified amount of Zimbabwe's interest-free loans. Harare remains ineligible for financial support from the international financial institutions for a number of reasons, including default in the 2000s and US pressure to open the economy. Zimbabwe owed at least US$12.7 billion of its total public debt of US$17.7 billion to external creditors. While mainstream critics repeated the mantra that China will increase its political leverage over Zimbabwe, China's ambassador to Zimbabwe noted that the 'loans are not intended to foster dependency but to strengthen bilateral relations and economic cooperation' (Buyisiwe 2024).

The increased cost and precarity for borrowing undermine any wishful notion that UN Sustainable Development Goals may be even partially met (African Union et al. 2023). More than 282 million people in Africa (20% of the population) were undernourished in 2022 – an increase of 57 million people since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. At least 868 million people were moderately or severely food insecure and more than 342 million were severely food insecure. The majority of Africa's population in 2021, about 78%, could not afford a healthy diet – compared with 42% at the global level. The cost of securing a healthy diet has been increasing: it was estimated at 3.57 purchasing power parity (PPP) dollars a day in 2021 in Africa – higher than the threshold for extreme poverty, which is seen to be 2.15 PPP dollars a day (FAO et al. 2023, v).

Despite the relentlessly gloomy evidence for Africa's economic and social outlook the African Development Bank insists that while the continent's 'growth momentum' is stalled, because of 'significant headwinds, Africa has also shown remarkable resilience' (AfDB 2023, iii). The historically dominant tropes of the economic mainstream are repeated by the AfDB noting the continent's stock of 'huge natural wealth' and the need for all stakeholders to 'put in place all the necessary legal and fiscal apparatus' to address 'structural barriers to private investments' in promoting 'climate actions and green transitions' and 'to improve the management of their natural resources' (AfDB 2023, iv).

The language and rhetoric of the international financial institutions and development agencies remain similar to those of the protagonists for continental economic reform in the disastrous lost development decades of the 1980s and 1990s. They argue that growth can be increased and sustained on the continent if private (foreign) investment can be encouraged by developing a more secure political environment to facilitate the easier removal to the global North of the continent's natural resource base. This would be simpler if there was a reduction in 'unresolved internal conflicts' (AfDB 2023, 6). The mistake in such analyses is that conflict is seen to be local and national and usually shorn of any (colonial) historical past and context. The crisis of late imperialist capitalism is revealed

most starkly in what Ali Kadri has called a 'global waste phenomenon'. The evidence just mentioned for African debt and poverty, hunger and impoverishment is not accidental or the result of poor local policy, although there may be some of the latter. Africa's impoverishment is the outcome of unequal development and is systemically entwined with the US-driven imperialist system (Kadri 2023). Kadri notes that there are more 'prematurely wasted people and pollution in evidence today than all the commodity wealth on display':

> Capital has become manifest as a system of relations whose activities have placed the planet beyond the point of no return. Global society is repressed and made to pay for and consume the waste. Standard theory says that the use values of commodities are stripped away from their social producers and sold. Since the heap of harmful commodities, the waste, is way higher than the heap of useful or sane commodities, waste products are also stripped away from social producers and sold back to them. (Kadri and Leukefeld 2024, 146)

Ali Kadri's argument draws attention to the need to understand the changing historical character of capitalism and to how explanations of the contemporary African crisis can only be fully understood in how centuries of value extraction have generated impoverishment on the continent. Profits create waste, and costs of dealing with waste are borne by society. In Africa the costs of social reproduction are so suppressed that often only bare life is possible and destitution is widespread. Impoverishment in Africa feeds the economic and social reproduction of the North.

There is here a continuity in Lenin's theory of imperialism, namely the persistent role that war plays in resolving contradictions of financial capitalism:

> Given the phenomenon of waste, we know for a fact that capitalism commodifies all forms of life, like water, trash, and even human lives. With so many wasted lives, people dying before their time, and wasted nature being produced, commodified and priced, and also sold for profits in their own market gestation time, the militarism as a domain of accumulation … has evolved into the primary domain for the whole capitalist system. (Kadri and Leukefeld 2024, 148)

This argument is borne out in the evidence for increased military spending, the genocidal imperialist war in Palestine and the role of Israel's meddling in Africa generally and the war in Sudan in particular. World military expenditure rose for a ninth consecutive year in 2022 to an all-time high of US$2.4 trillion. For the first time, in 2023 military expenditure rose in all geographical regions and the US is the major spender and supplier of weapons. US military spending in 2023 rose by 2.3% to US$916 billion, representing 68% of NATO military spending (SIPRI 2024). In Africa the biggest military spenders are the Democratic Republic of Congo with an increase of 105% in 2022 and South Sudan with an increase of 78% compared with 2022. Algeria's military spending grew by 76% to US$18.3 billion – the largest level of expenditure ever recorded in the country, made possible by increased revenue from hydrocarbon exports after the Ukraine crisis. War is at the heart of imperialism. Capitalists gain from profits generated in the process of war – militarism generates demand – and the class actors gaining from higher profits increase their power and influence on decision-making in the imperialist triad. War also reduces life expectancy relative to its potential. In stark terms, Kadri notes, 'It is the shorter life expectancy of the South relative to the North, which becomes the benchmark that signifies the divergence between the moneyed form of Northern wealth relative to its Southern counterpart' (Kadri and Leukefeld 2024, 162).

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'We are all Palestinians…'

Devaluing human life in war, or more accurately genocide, is most recently evident in Palestine. Nelson Mandela (1997) was clear that 'we know too well that our freedom is incomplete without the freedom of the Palestinians.' After the Hamas attack of October 2023, Israel bombed Gaza, taking its military spending for the year to US$27.5 billion by the end of 2023, killing indiscriminately more than 38,000 Palestinians (mostly civilians) by the end of June 2024. The accumulated effect of the genocide, however, is estimated to be more than 186,000 deaths. This figure for Palestinian deaths caused by Israel highlights the indirect health implications beyond the direct harm of violence taking account of those who have not been recovered from under the rubble of bombing, the indirect results of the destruction of Gaza's health facilities, food distribution and other public provision (Khatib, McKee and Yusuf 2024). The genocide is an imperialist war. It is a stark example of how settler colonial Israel continues to try and separate people of Asia from the African masses generating the spoils of war for Washington and European elites. 'Israeli aggression is itself a rudimentary step in global capital accumulation, that is, it adds to accumulation by militarism on a global scale; it will not cease' (American Friends Service Committee 2023; Kadri and Leukefeld 2024, 150).

> Israel, pound for pound, is the best investment the US has ever made. Israel is the purest expression of Western power, combining militarism, imperialism, settler colonialism, counterinsurgency, occupation, racism, instilling ideological defeat, huge profitable war-making and hi-tech development into a manticore of destruction, death, and mayhem. (Ajl 2024a, 3)

Since the early years of the construction of the state of Israel the US has viewed the settler colony as a vehicle for advancing Washington's regional and strategic interests. As US President Joe Biden noted in 1986 and subsequently repeated, 'if there were not an Israel, we'd have to invent one' (Ayyash 2023). This was first evident in the 1956 attack on Egypt with the Tripartite Agreement and then with arming the state in its war against Egypt and other frontline states. Israel has from its inception persistently interfered in Africa with military, economic and social mechanisms to undermine sovereignty and promote authoritarianism and violence, advancing imperialist interests and militarisation (Dowling 2023). Tel Aviv helped in the proxy war and sanctions against Libya (Capasso 2020, 2022) and has long acted as trainer for African armed forces, notably special forces and presidential guards in, for example, Equatorial Guinea and Uganda. Although Israel may only account for 1% of weapons transfers to sub-Saharan Africa, small arms weapons and armoured vehicles feature significantly. They were allegedly important during the Rwandan genocide, and Israel plays a significant role as a broker in facilitating arms transfers to the continent. Israel, with a reputation for 'loose export norms' (Dowling 2023), has not ratified the Arms Trade Treaty and it has three offices of the Israeli Weapons Industries in Africa – the largest for any continent. Israel remains secretive about its arms deals but there is evidence for deals with Angola, Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, Chad, Lesotho, Rwanda, Uganda, Nigeria and the Central Africa Republic (Wezeman 2011). Israel also offered to supply nuclear weapons to apartheid South Africa in 1975 (McGreal 2010).

Sudan

The genocide in Palestine may have pushed war in Sudan off the media agenda. However, there was little reportage or international concern to reduce the conflict even before Israel's destruction of Gaza. This is despite famine in Sudan being mapped long before its impact in

April 2024. Sudan has the world's largest number of people facing acute food shortage, with mortality projections in June 2024 to be in excess of 2.5 million, or about 15% of the population in Darfur and Kordofan (Borger 2024; Medani 2024). More than 11 million people have been displaced within the country or become refugees especially but not only in neighbouring Chad. The UN has noted that war has created the world's biggest internal displacement, leading to an acute crisis of food access and production affecting more than 25 million people (half the population), as violence has destroyed livelihoods and access to income, disrupted farming, and in 2023 reduced food production by an estimated 46% (OCHA 2024). The war in Sudan has rather inappropriately been labelled 'war between generals' (Ahmed and Johnson 2024), as fighting erupted in April 2023 between soldiers loyal to the head of the armed forces, General Abdel Fattah al-Burnhan, the de facto ruler at the time, and General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti, who is head of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which combines a number of different militia. The successful toppling of the government of dictator Omar al-Bashir in 2019, after 26 years in office, failed to consolidate or promote democratic deepening and transition to sustained representative politics. Opposition forces were frequently frustrated by remnants of al-Bashir's regime. Instead, a military coup in October 2021 replaced a broad-based coalition of opposition forces as the RSF and the Sudan National Army became impatient at any possible restrictions placed on the military by a civilian transition. The military was anxious at attempts to curb its corporate power derived from its economic assets and opportunity to generate private wealth in agriculture, manufacturing and trade. Rumours also spoke of sections of the army wanting to reassemble Islamist forces close to the ousted dictator al-Bashir by mounting an offensive against the RSF. The coup may also have been a pre-emptive strike triggered by possible US impatience with the pace of a democratic transition.

Massacres of civilians and targeted killings, especially in Darfur, were a harsh reminder of atrocities committed in the early to mid 2000s by the Janjaweed militia, from which the RSF emerged, killing up to 300,000 black Africans – something for which the International Criminal Court indicted al-Bashir. The latter had admitted that while he did not have any links to the Janjaweed, he had helped form militias to defend the country against what he called dissident elements and foreign influences that he declared were targeting Darfur's resources and threatening to break up the unified state of Sudan.

Herein, and perhaps somewhat ironically with the comments from al-Bashir, lies a glimpse at the reasons behind Sudan's war, the levels of violence, imperialist interests and displacement in Darfur and Kordofan. ROAPE has previously explored different dimensions to recurrent and systemic crises of Sudan's political economy. A special issue (no. 26, 1983) was pathbreaking in documenting and exploring a number of different dimensions to class politics and social transformation. It was an issue that was initiated and led by Sudan scholar-activists and examined the context of the country's then economic crisis, class formation and agrarian transformation. The analysis of what became known as Sudan's second civil war (1983–2005) was deepened by Alison Ayers (2010), who challenged the mainstream tropes regarding the causes of conflict and 'civil war'. She argued that it was mistaken to reify focus on combatants or insurrectionary forces without examining how political violence was historically constituted.

Ayers assembled a compelling argument that an appreciation and explanation of civil war needed to be structured by an analytical and methodological approach that framed conflict in the context of 'technologies of colonial rule' that produced and reproduced

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fractures in social relations of race, religion and ethnicity which became mechanisms for military mobilisation. Second, she argued for the need to explore the context of the Cold War and subsequent geopolitics that worsened conflict. Third, she stressed the importance of understanding the impact that Sudan's incorporation into the world economy has had for the 'dynamics of accumulation, based on primitive accumulation and dependent primary commodity production'. In other words, while it may be commonplace to see violence as the result of individuals and lawless militaries and militias, we only get a more analytically precise explanation for violence, and genocide, if wars are seen as not new or extraordinary or internal but 'crucial and constitutive dimensions of Sudan's neo-colonial condition' (Ayers 2010, 153).

The mistake of characterising the current civil war as one of ethnicity or battles between two warring generals has also been critiqued in a more recent issue of this journal. Mark Duffield and Nick Stockton (2024, 106) have provided an outline of 'an historically and empirically grounded explanation for the post-colonial destruction of the nation states of Somalia and Sudan'. In doing so they placed centre stage the economic and political processes of primitive accumulation in the greater Horn. In Sudan they highlight that the violence, death and destruction in Darfur results from land clearances 'to convert socially tilled soils and water resources used for autonomous subsistence into pastures for intensive commercial livestock production' (*ibid.*, 107). They document a pattern of 'ecological strip mining' (*ibid.*) that dispossesses local Fur, Zaghawa and Masalit communities, 'freeing' labour to work – but without employment opportunities – and dispossessing households of assets, particularly livestock, without which the indigenous population become destitute, and refugees, if they manage to escape slaughter at the hands of the RSF.

Sudan reminds us of capitalist and imperialist pressures that underpin war. They do so by highlighting that capitalism is intrinsically a violent process. They highlight how primitive accumulation is not a short-term or temporary process in the formative period of capitalist development, but more permanent and recurrent. Looking at the Horn as a regional economy Duffield and Stockton reveal that even during the height of the humanitarian crisis where aid and development assistance was intense, Sudan (and Somalia) continued to export large volumes of livestock to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Their argument is that the changing demands for food production, and consumption, create the demand for primitive accumulation and violence in Sudan (see also Woertz 2014). The demand for meat in the UAE has stoked dispossession in Darfur as the ideological rhetoric of warring factions is expressed in terms of racialised Afro-Arab binary and militia dehumanisation of people with black African identity who may be Masalit, Fur or Zaghawa (Thomas 2024). There has been much written about Hermedti's wealth and ownership of gold mined in western Sudan, but the RSF and their UAE financiers have also driven a commodification of land and labour through violent dispossession and displacement of local populations, so that land could be mined for livestock production and export. The endless wars in the Horn, and especially Somalia and Sudan, are not humanitarian disasters per se characterised by essentialist ethnic and regional conflict or megalomaniacal army officers.

The violence and disaster for the majority of Sudanese is the outcome of deep-seated and intense primitive accumulation in Darfur and parts of Kordofan that rewards not only factions of Sudan's military but also regional actors like the UAE and Saudi Arabia. These two states have vied for expanded regional hegemony and suppressed internal dissent and support for the Arab uprisings in 2011 (Mahjoub 2024). The UAE has been pivotal not only

as a market for livestock to feed its population but also as a supplier of arms to the RSF – supplied to the UAE from the US and UK among others. The UAE has been the destination for gold produced in RSF strongholds and a financial centre for RSF 'front companies to provide weapons, supplies and financing services' (Mahjoub 2024). The UAE has also helped to manage and groom the image and PR of the RSF (Lynch and Gramer 2019). It would also seem that members of the Sudan Armed Forces and especially the RSF have been variously integrated into the UAE's military system, helping wage war against Ansar Allah – the Houthi movement – in Yemen. The attempts to exert political and military influence in the greater Horn has also been evident in the roles played by the UAE, Saudi Arabia and also the US, in seeking to shape discussions for a post-genocide Sudan (Wanni 2024).

Agendas

Anniversaries are moments to reflect on what has been done and to think how they may have been done differently. In the editorial that marked ROAPE's 30th anniversary, editors considered what might be at the top of a radical agenda for transformation in Africa (Bujra et al 2004). They asked what kinds of themes were important to explore as part of a 'renewal'. There were, they argued, five dominant issues: 'globalised capitalism'; US militarism and unilateralism; the reproduction of labour and society; states, state failure and conflict; and resistance and 'solidarity' today. These have been crucial themes to help understand African political economy and struggles to promote a radical transformation. Editors in 2004 reiterated the importance of class analysis in the context of 'prevailing conditions of primitive accumulation' (*ibid.*, 559). I have highlighted this in the case of Sudan and importantly I have shown how local and national class struggles are often shaped by, but not reducible to, the consequences of US imperialism. This is a theme developed in this issue.

Imperialism is the key framework within which contemporary political economy in Africa is shaped and it is an imperialism that is evidenced by the collective military, economic and social power of the triad, US, EU and Japan. The US may dominate militarily but it cannot govern as unilaterally as it might wish, and China's increasingly global presence challenges Washington's imperialist hegemony. ROAPE will need to explore the role of China in Africa in more detail. This has begun with the Roape.net collection of essays from The New School symposium of December 2023 'The African Continent and China: Counter-Hegemonic Narratives'. Yin Chen and Corrina Mullin (2024) and others in that collection expose the limitations of most scholarly prevailing narratives and stereotypes about China. They challenge the false equivalences of comparing China to hegemonic Western states or that China can be characterised as imperialist. This contrasts sharply with several previously posted blogs on Roape.net (Wengraf 2018; Plys, Lô and Mohamed 2022). It is too simplistic to call China imperialist. It is a reductionist assertion implying proximity to and reifying elements of Lenin's definition that imperialism is defined by domestic monopoly capitalism and increased presence of capital export in the world market. At least two themes can be developed and interrogated further: the character of China's domestic development policy and the impact of Chinese political, economic and social relations in Africa.

Reflecting on the character of China's development strategy can help with regard to the possible emergence of national sovereign projects in Africa as a form of delinking

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(Amin 2019; Ajl 2024b). China has promoted an anti-systemic position managing local and national capital accumulation that is not simply subordinated to the international law of value. In this context,

> the governing classes of the periphery [can] actively insert their countries into the world trade system with the strategic aim of achieving a gradual growth in the level of the population's scientific and technical sophistication. (Macheda and Nadalini 2021, 120)

The Chinese Communist Party has promoted and embedded an escalation of the technical capabilities of the national labour force and done so by

> safeguarding the country from two typical pathologies affecting the peripheral capitalist countries in which the development of productive forces is subordinated to the pursuit of profitability: the halting of the growth in formal employment and wages, and the regression of the country's productive structure towards the non-tradable sector. (*ibid.*, 136)

China may be the world's largest economy as measured by purchasing power parity, and recent growth has been fuelled by increased demand for imports of raw materials from across the Third World, not just Africa. Yet, as Lenin argued, imperialism is characterised by 'superprofits' shaped by the global supremacy of the majority of humankind by a minority of dominant states (Li 2021). While China's foreign assets are greater than its liabilities, it is important to note that the structure of its assets is different from foreign investment in China (State Administration of Foreign Exchange 2023). Foreign capital in China attempts to benefit from the country's cheap labour supply in manufactures for export where rates of return were between 5 and 6% between 2010 and 2018. In contrast, China's total overseas assets are mostly held in reserve assets, currencies including the US dollar with investments in 'low-return but "liquid" instruments like U.S. government bonds' (Li 2021). The rate of return on China's overseas assets in the eight years after 2010 averaged 3%. The implication of this, among other things, is that Chinese foreign assets are largely in the form of a claim for future access to US and other goods and services, yet these are likely to be unobtainable: deploying them to boost industrial growth is likely to plunge the planet into an ecological abyss.

China is not a country of the capitalist core. It is a net provider of surplus value to the capitalist world system and it is not a net recipient of surplus value from the world periphery. 'China is thus best described as a semi-peripheral country in the capitalist world system' (Li 2021). It also, of course, provides a brake on imperialist military aggression by the triad, political support for sovereignty in Africa by not seeking conditionality for its aid and loans and a possible mirror for alternative development strategies that are driven first and foremost by national and then regional plans for development.

This leads to the second important focus on China that ROAPE can help develop: a more systematic analysis of the impact that Chinese investment, lending and infrastructure development, including the role of experts and expatriate labour, has on prospects for radical transformation in Africa. A lot of commentary on the role of China in Africa has come from Western media echoing business anxiety, particularly from US, Canadian and European mining and energy conglomerates being pushed aside by China's race for African raw materials. The actual levels and impact of Chinese investment and foreign lending remain opaque, and it is too soon to argue convincingly what the long-term implications are for Chinese links with particular states or the continent as a whole.

Imperialism shapes capitalist interests of profitability and security, labour supply and its reproduction, all themes this journal will continue to expose. But does a journal have a responsibility that goes beyond reporting and relaying publishable submissions? ROAPE certainly has a responsibility to report on different African-based opposition forces of workers and farmers that have, for example, recently contested US and French militarism in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Senegal. 'The South continues to be the "zone of storms" – repeated revolts, some of which are potentially revolutionary' (Amin 2019, 404). Future issues of this journal might extend the list of important themes by including contributions that go beyond documenting examples of resistance to local dispossession and US militarism to map out alternative strategies that can advance national sovereign projects for justice and democratic decision-making that actively reduce imperialist intervention and local ruling class power and authority, including the possible role of the military in Africa in advancing a radical agenda for change. To what extent are there social movements that assemble alternative agendas with workers and peasants at their core, and which are deliverable rather than utopian abstractions from reality? And what are the organisational structures that might ensure the delivery of such agendas? What does national liberation or sovereignty mean, and under what kinds of conditions can social movements seize state power to make and deliver development policy that will advance living conditions for the poor, successfully breaking from imperialist dominance? This agenda, moreover, will take place in the context of an accelerating climate emergency where labour is displaced and dispossessed not only by deleterious consequences of foreign and local capitalist penetration, but also by ecological storm, famine and challenges to the maintenance even of bare life.

ROAPE helped with developing these agendas with African activists by holding three Connections workshops, which took place in Accra in November 2017, Dar es Salaam in April 2018, and Johannesburg in November 2018. The focus for these meetings was on African activists, trade unionists and researchers exploring agendas for radical transformation, industrial strategy, political change and policy reform. We will help advance more of these kinds of meetings in the months to come, where African activists set agendas for debating and planning revolutionary transformation. In these circumstances the journal becomes more than a vessel for assembling critiques of capitalism and imperialism, of adding to the criticism of US- and EU-led policy practices hidden under a rhetoric of Africa rising or optimism for (eventual) growth. The journal becomes a vehicle to help advance 'practical utopianism' – radical thinking that highlights the range and scope for African futures (Saul and Leys 1998; Bush 2021).

Articles in this issue

Articles in this issue deepen and advance many of the themes raised in this editorial. Peter Lawrence reflects on 50 years of ROAPE. A founding editor, he examines the role of ROAPE as a journal committed to the production of knowledge in the service of the struggle against global capitalist imperialism. He does this by situating the debate about knowledge production in and on Africa in the context of how ROAPE began as a radical left journal in the early 1970s. He reflects on some of the tensions within the editorial working group over time, highlighting, among other things, the challenges confronted by engaged scholars on Africa and the role of activism in promoting radical transformation. He also

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underlines the decision of the editorial working group to leave a global publishing house at the end of 2023 to ensure that ROAPE remains entirely independent, now with genuinely free and open access to all readers and doing this with the platform ScienceOpen.

Extending some of the themes linked to African knowledge production, Luke Sinwell interrogates the meanings and practice of 30 years of scholar-activism in South Africa. He looks at the dynamic relationship between race and class and knowledge production and what radical transformation might mean in that context. He argues that outside mainstream politics the left has lost its way in supporting grassroots political struggles. He argues that it is necessary to recognise that point and embrace new ways of making contact with and learning from local political struggles. Offering lessons for elsewhere in Africa he invokes Walter Rodney to 'ground together' to embrace and develop a myriad of streams of restlessness, discontent and militancy in South Africa.

Matteo Capasso and Essam Abdelrasul Bubaker Elkorghli demonstrate how US-led imperialism is the fundamental contradiction to be assessed when looking at development and underdevelopment in northern Africa. They detail how US imperialism tries to integrate different social formations in northern Africa into the circuits of capital in a number of distinct but integrated forms, ideologically, militarily and financially. They also highlight, however, that while the power of the US to disrupt organisational capacity to promote independent sovereign political economy continues, there have also recently been attacks that have shaken US hegemony – the ongoing national liberation struggle of Palestine and military-inspired coups in West and Central Africa against neo-colonialism. As they note, 'The lessons from these revolutionary moments are clear and must not be underestimated' for the region of North Africa.

Ndongo Sylla develops the themes of hostility and opposition to imperialism. He does so by exploring the changing role of French imperialism in West and Central Africa, interrogating the reasons behind coups in francophone Africa. He critiques mainstream views that see coups as representing a 'backsliding' of democracy or consider that the 'epidemic' of coups reflects a move towards unconstitutional challenges to law and order and to liberal democracy. He instead develops an analysis of the importance of the historical backdrop to different military interventions: the common themes between them, not the least the role of French occupation and continued destabilisation led from Paris, and what distinguishes the coups in relation to the specificity of the country cases. By exploring what is historically specific to the different military interventions Sylla asks how coups can be progressive in the struggle for radical political transformation. He notes among other things the role that youth, workers and peasants play in contesting imperialism and its multifaceted consequences.

Hannah Cross takes apart the international migration regime to highlight how it reveals imperialist power in West Africa and the Maghreb. She demonstrates the role played by the EU and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in promoting and underpinning US imperialism. This is achieved under the guise of promoting the global governance of migration, which advances the social relations of production on an international and local scale. She also compares global migration governance with structural adjustment as a set of border and development policies that sustain dependent relations between the elites of indebted African countries and the international capitalist class. In doing this she highlights the clear institutional parallels between the IOM and the international

financial institutions. Global migration governance, for Cross, creates widespread chaos and displacement in the advance of finance capital.

Lyn Ossome deepens our understanding of gender inequalities and how they are part of the structural character of imperialism. She explores conditions of global capital accumulation and how the consequences of the immiseration it creates generates a gendered labour substratum of core–periphery imperialist relations. Elaborating this, she highlights processes and implications of gender inequalities, focusing on how the crisis of social reproduction is revealed in relations between the core and the periphery, especially in contemporary agrarian questions of access to land and the commons, the centrality of land reform as a basis of development for liberation and how these themes constitute struggles for national sovereignty and national liberation. Ossome argues that all considerations of, among other things, food and nature, land or nation cannot proceed without analysis of gendered labour regimes that are 'trapped under the immiserating weight of capitalist accumulation'. 'The anti-imperialist wars we continue to wage are nothing if they do not retain a focus on [these] materialist feminist histories.'

Notes

1. Prabhat Patnaik, 'Whatever Has Happened to Imperialism?': see Patnaik 1990, p. 76.
2. These and subsequent back issues of ROAPE can now be accessed free of charge on the ScienceOpen platform at https://www.scienceopen.com/collection/957770c3-4943-4fde-a72b-841025ea4ab1 (last accessed July 30, 2024).

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Ray Bush*
Professor Emeritus, School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds, UK; Editorial Working Group, Review of African Political Economy
*Email: r.c.bush@leeds.ac.uk
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2829-551X