

The essay below is an attempt to argue against wars prosecuted by the United States and other imperialist countries. It is aimed at a broad progressive audience. The essay is outlined directly below, and the bulk of the essay consists in a focused development of each of these outline points. The essay is meant to be read as one extended argument.

We spend the plurality of the essay arguing for the coherence and relevance of Lenin's analysis of imperialism. Though Lenin's theory is well-known, it is not often well-explicated; even when his work on this question is not simply read uncharitably, even by people who claim to be socialists (or Leninists), presentations of his theory often focus on isolated parts in a misleading fashion. Even when Lenin's theory is judged coherent, its relevance is often downplayed, usually through the misinterpretation of global trade statistics or the severing of analysis of imperialism with his analysis of national liberation, the question of war, and his analysis of the labor aristocracy. We address all of these connections except the difficult topic of the labor aristocracy, and we hope to make the case that Lenin's theory is in fact coherent and correct—a crucial starting point for progressive people concerned about socialism and international relations today. We also introduce many writings of Lenin which are useful to read in the original but which are often not read (as Jim Blaut [notes](#), virtually all well-known Marxist commentaries on this topic cite *only* Lenin's *Imperialism*).

J. Seratsky *et al.* 27 July 2018

In this essay we try to explain why the US is at war with Syria and how progressive people should respond.

- I. The US has already been at war with Syria, long before the most recent round of allegations about the Syrian state's use of chemical weapons.
 - II. This means that the war on Syria is *not* a response to the demands of regular people, but a pre-existing plot on the part of the capitalist class; thus, although the commonsense interpretation of the April 2017 and April 2018 bombings is that it was a *response* on the part of the US state, especially Trump, to popular outcry against "the brutal Assad régime", this understanding inverts the real causality. The apparently natural, automatic response of the media to alleged crimes in Syria reflects a long-standing ruling class effort to get the US working class to accept a premeditated plot against Syria.
 - III. This long-planned war on Syria is wrong because it is an *imperialist* war in Lenin's sense. War is, of course, to be avoided at all costs, but sometimes, war is indeed historically progressive, as some defenders of US imperialism claim—for instance, WWII. So, anti-war activists must say loudly and clearly that the present war is wrong *because* it is an *imperialist* war and not a war of liberation. Imperialist nations systematically go to war for the *wrong reasons*, with the *wrong goals* and with the bloodiest possible outcomes.
 - A. Lenin's theory of imperialism: how Lenin applied Marx's analysis of capitalist development to a new historical epoch
 - B. Imperialism as decaying, or parasitic capitalism, imperialism as moribund capitalism, imperialism as oppressor vs. oppressed nation—the most important and most under-recognized aspects of Lenin's theory
 - C. Imperialist war vs. progressive war
 - IV. This implies a strategy for progressive forces in the imperialist nations: oppose the wars prosecuted by our capitalist state; defend the right to national self-determination of oppressed countries (even capitalist ones); struggle for socialism. We dispense with two common counter-arguments, launched from a nominally socialist perspective, against the right of nations to self-determination.
 - A. Counter-argument one: "isn't it wrong to support *any* kind of nationalism, even that of oppressed nations?"
 - B. Counter-argument two: "doesn't globalization make the nation-state irrelevant? why should anyone care about a struggle like that for self-determination, given that it seems so unlikely to succeed under current conditions?"
 - V. Addendum: a concrete debunking of some "socialist" calls to war on Syria.
 - A. DSA — official statement
 - B. DSA — prominent leaders
 - C. ISO — official statement
 - VI. Appendix:
 - A. On the difficult task of defining a "nation" — methodological notes
 - B. Lenin's definitions of colonial, semi-colonial, and dependent nations
 - C. On balances of trade and certain misguided rejections of Lenin's framework
1. The US war on Syria has been [going on for a long time](#), much longer than since April 2017, when the United States first "officially" fired on the Syrian government, or April 2018, the

date of the most recent *acknowledged strikes*.¹ A detailed summary of the major imperialist powers' efforts to destabilize Syria in recent years can be found [here](#) (UK), [here](#) (US), [here](#) (US), and [here](#) (US).²

2. The US state is a capitalist state. While the United States does hold elections for public office and have some other features of *formal* democracy, ultimately it is the capitalist class—the people who own the vast majority of the US' productive resources—which exercises power in this country (rather than “the people”). Another way of saying this is that the capitalist class is allowed to decide major social questions on which there is a conflict between them and the majority of people.

There are many mechanisms through which the capitalist class exercises this power. Some of the most transparent ones are: 1) bribery³ and 2) the close personal relationships between capitalists and politicians.⁴ These are fairly easy to spot, and most people know that these checks on democracy exist in the United States. But the most fundamental mechanism comes from the social power of capitalists themselves within the framework of the capitalist mode of production. Capitalists have, just as do workers, the power to strike: so long as the state respects the rule of private property within its borders (which is another way of saying, so long as there is no socialist revolution), it is bound to respect the right of capitalists to withhold investment, send capital abroad or squirrel it away in Cayman Islands accounts—in short, to generally wreak havoc on production, which no-one wants.⁵ In the words of the sociologist Fred Block, “in a capitalist economy, the level of economic activity is determined by private investment decisions of capitalists” and the possibility of “[their failure to invest at adequate levels \[...\] discourages state managers from taking actions that might seriously decrease the rate of investment](#)”.⁶

In other words, while the power of capitalists is definitely not destined to last forever, any significant challenge to that power will require a concerted, wide-ranging social struggle.

¹ For details, [see here](#). The United States is very plausibly alleged to have fired on Syrian state forces without acknowledgment in [May](#) and [June](#).

² We advise readers to be aware of each source and to take what each says with a grain of salt—none of these sources are exactly “Marxist”, but at the same time, we find no serious errors in these articles.

³ As Friedrich Engels argued in *The Origin of the Family, State, and Private Property* (1884), [America “is the classic example” of the “plain corruption of officials”](#).

⁴ They go to the same country clubs and send their children to the same schools; in countries like the United States, where electoral campaigns require vast sums of capital, being chummy with wealthy citizens is a significant asset; and so on. This specific way of explaining *how* and *why* the state is essentially capitalist is spelled out clearly in Chapter Five of Ralph Miliband's still-relevant [1964 book, *The State in Capitalist Society*](#).

⁵ Actually, even if a state *is* willing to significantly challenge the rules of private property, capitalists in that country could *still* remain powerful if other, more powerful capitalist states are willing to intervene on their behalf—to essentially act as the “real” state and overrule the weaker state. This consideration does not apply to the U.S. as the world's most powerful state, but this is a very relevant consideration for most other states.

⁶ See the hyperlink above to “The Ruling Class Does Not Rule: Notes on the Marxist Theory of the State”, *Socialist Revolution* 33 (1977). Readers who go ahead and read Block's essay will note that Block goes so far as to *reject* theories which suggests that there is such thing as “a class-conscious ruling class” (p. 8). This obviously bends the stick way too far in the opposite direction—plenty of ruling classes in capitalist history *have* been class-conscious and well-organized, though not always. It would be hard to think of a case where there wasn't at least a minority of the ruling class which understood itself as such and took it upon itself to act as a representative of the ruling class as a whole. But Block is right that this *needn't be* true: for a functional, coherent capitalist society to exist, capitalists only need the power to “passively” veto state policy.

Challenging capitalists when one lives in a capitalist society is the path of *most* resistance; and, politicians, like most people, tend to take the path of least resistance (the goal of the socialist movement is to *convince* most people that the path of most resistance is in their own interest in the long-run). While it *could* be the case that elected politicians will choose to challenge the power of capitalists, it would mean sacrificing their own interests (whereas for a militant, politically-advanced working class, it would mean advancing our own long-run interests). Production would drop, a virtual civil war would ensue, and those persons challenging capitalism would need a very detailed, serious plan for restoring production on a non-capitalist basis—basically, it's safe to conclude that no significant number of non-revolutionary politicians would ever seriously or successfully undertake this task. Only a serious, socialist movement has the capability to undertake such a task, and it is also the only agent which is even remotely likely to do so.

So, in summary, we are on very solid ground when we assume that politicians with no special commitment to socialism will be scared off of any actions which threaten capitalism *long* before this point. In other words, politicians without the science of revolution at hand and a militant base are overwhelmingly likely to respect the rules of capitalism, and those rules *fundamentally require* that capitalists be allowed some meaningful degree of freedom of investment or disinvestment.

In short, the state in a capitalist society is basically governed by the rules of capitalist reproduction, short of a socialist revolution.

3. What does this have to do with Syria? Well, what all of the above means is that when capitalist states, including the US state, pursue war policies, they are pursuing capitalist (or capitalism-compatible) policies. Of course, they are often enough acting most immediately according to the wishes of senior government figures and not *directly* on the orders of big capitalists; but, these senior figures very often see themselves as being in hock to the big capitalists (or they are themselves big capitalists, as in the case of Trump). But this is actually irrelevant either way since the capitalist class as a whole exercises veto power over these plans through the mechanisms laid out above. Again, unless capitalist politicians were to, against all odds, challenge capitalism, they are ultimately bound to respect the rules of capitalism.⁷ Basically, capitalist states are run by politicians who *are* capitalists, or who are tied to capitalists through interpersonal and business relationships; in any case, both of these groups must bend to the will of capital in general unless they are willing to and capable of overturning capitalism. In other words, state policy responds most directly to people who are capitalists or intend to act in the interests of capitalists. Only after that do the wishes of the general public come into play, and even then, only non-capitalists with the highest social

⁷ Again, it's important to stress that the problem of *political will* is *not* “are capitalist politicians willing to regulate capitalism” because many of them patently are willing to do so. The problem is that partially bending the rules of capitalism can, in many cases, be ineffective and, in some cases, create social rules which are worse than unregulated capitalism or socialism. Though serious social reforms *are* possible within the framework of capitalism, the all-important question of political will is “are capitalist politicians willing to challenge capitalism fundamentally” by breaking with it or by passing social reforms which can only be effective if workers have a *technical* role in maintaining them (i.e., we make sure that they're enforced) and a *political* role in maintaining them (i.e., we actually maintain some kind of institutionalized social power after the passage of the reform). This requires a revolutionary movement which aims at overthrowing capitalism—reformism, ironically, [cannot actually even produce serious reforms](#) as Rosa Luxemburg famously noted; only revolutionary movements can.

status (such as professionals and managers or very well-paid workers) play any role. The working class exercises no *independent* influence on policy except when it takes it upon itself to remind the capitalist class that it can, indeed, threaten production and thus their profits—and even then, unless workers keep up the pressure, backroom dealing and legal chicanery very often dilute the content of whatever reforms workers are able to win.⁸

In other words, the vast bulk of policy in the United States which is considered seriously by the state—and the *only policy* which is considered in situations other than those of active working-class revolt—is that which is drawn up by the capitalist class. A particularly active and “political” subset of the capitalist class—or people employed by it—plan this policy consciously. Those people then present those plans to politicians, whether said politicians have already been elected or are still actively campaigning, and threaten to “[make the economy scream](#)” or to de-fund the candidate’s campaign if those politicians disagree.

And there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that this theory of elite-driven state policy is true, both for [the Syrian case](#) in particular and [for US policy overall](#). Consider the fact that, whatever crimes the Syrian state is accused of committing—and people living outside of Syria without expertise in chemistry have little ability to independently verify claims about what the Syrian state did or didn’t do—there are US ally states which have committed far greater crimes while leaving behind incontrovertible evidence of those crimes.⁹ The kingdom of Saudi Arabia, ruled by a tiny cabal of especially-conservative capitalists, is a good example. In fact, its crimes are so well-known that it is perhaps the “average American’s” [most disliked state](#), even though the average American is both fairly ignorant about world politics and plied with pro-Saudi propaganda by the US elite (and the government of Saudi Arabia is disliked with [good reason](#)). So, if regular people were running the show, if US war policy were *simply* a neutral, almost-automatic reflection of what *most* Americans want, Barack Obama and Donald Trump would have gotten on television and threatened “decapitation raids” against the leaders of a country like the KSA unless the KSA promised to adopt more progressive policies. But Obama and Trump, of course, did not.

What this means, then, is that, based on both the evidence and our analysis of it, hard facts and hard logic, the US state must have reasons for threatening other countries with war which are *different than* “the US state wants to help those countries for moral reasons” or “the American people wanted to help those countries and the state responded”.¹⁰ [War is relatively](#)

⁸ By “independent”, we mean that workers are not able to pursue their distinctive interests *as* workers; the fact that workers and capitalists sometimes share non-class-based interests and thus both support the same policies (e.g. it is in the interest of both to have effective traffic safety laws) does not change this.

⁹ One might ask: “how can we be sure that *those states* commit such great crimes if we can’t be sure that the Syrian state commits the crimes of which it’s accused?” The answer is that the allies of the United States admit this. As the Jewish anti-Zionist group [IfNotNow points out](#), the state of Israel, after massacring children and journalists engaged in a non-violent demonstration in Palestine, insisted on Twitter its military knew “where every bullet landed”. In the same way, the kingdom of Saudi Arabia makes basically no effort whatsoever to hide its gross oppression of women, Shi’a Muslims, immigrants, and workers.

¹⁰ We don’t deny that many American now really *do* want war on those countries. Propaganda against those countries certainly *is* effective, but we argue that American want war on those countries *primarily because* someone tells them to want it. In other words, we argue that most people in the US are simply ignorant about most of the rest of the world and that this ignorance, when exposed to propaganda, produces a highly-artificial and reactive demand for war. For instance, surely no more than 15 percent of the US population “organically” cared about, or even knew the name of, Syria in, say, 2008. Thus “democratic demands for war” are heavily

[expensive](#), even for the world's richest per-capita economy, and the capitalist state does not, in the long-run, tolerate any expenses as relatively-costly as war if they didn't ultimately promise some kind of class-wide benefit (even if those expenses are easily afforded in "objective terms" by the capitalist class).¹¹ Thus, the current drive for war with Syria does not reflect US residents' preferences, but a pre-existing ruling class plot to attack Syria which the capitalist class would like US workers to accept without dissent (evidence of such a plot is provided below).

4. But, it is not just capitalism *as such* that matters for thinking about the war on Syria—thinking about why war exists, how to analyze it, and how to oppose it—but a specific form of capitalism which we call *imperialism*. By analogy, *it is not just war as such that socialists are against; it is imperialist wars specifically*. The fact that imperialist wars *are* imperialist wars is a good enough reason, in itself, to oppose them. And, conversely, we maintain that some non-imperialist wars are actually progressive and should be supported (such as the Syrian nation's war of national liberation).¹² In this section, we lay out what imperialism is in V.I. Lenin's terms, how it differs from capitalism as such, and then what it means for a war to be imperialist or not.

Before going further and defining imperialism, we want to stress again that a central problem of most anti-war arguments in the US is that it ignores this specific question, the question of the *social character* of war (see section VI for more on this). These arguments fail to recognize imperialist war for what it is and instead treat war and society in general.

It is worth now setting out what this word "imperialism" actually means; after all, it is a word which is used very generally in some cases, sometimes to mean something as simple as "the participation of one state in the affairs of another" or "any oppression of a group of people".¹³ This looseness of definition sometimes leads to [transparently ridiculous usages](#), so we'll now make clear what we mean by this word.

a. Lenin's theory of imperialism: how Lenin applied Marx's analysis of capitalist development to a new historical epoch

We use "imperialism" here in the specific sense in which the revolutionary V.I. Lenin did:

capitalism at that stage of development at which the dominance of monopolies and finance capital is established; in which the export of capital

conditioned by capitalist propaganda, to the point that it's a mistake or a purposeful lie to represent elite warmaking as a simple response to "natural desires for war" or somesuch.

¹¹ For proof of this penny-pinching mentality, consider the [absolute obsession, common to both big capitalist parties, with cutting Social Security](#). This kind of basic social insurance program, which any kind of rationally-organized society requires, is loathed by all wings and all fractions of the US capitalist class. This is *despite* the fact that such expenses serve an obvious social function (even from the narrow standpoint of the capitalist class' concern with depressing social discontent) and are relatively efficient and cheap to administer.

¹² Arguments otherwise would have meant a completely unjustifiable neutrality during the progressive war of the Union North to reunify the United States or the progressive war of the Soviet people against the German fascist army, even though those wars—*because* they were wars—often had harmful side-effects.

¹³ An historical account of the word is given in the introduction to a volume of early Marxist writings on imperialism edited by Richard Day and Daniel Gaido (*Discovering Imperialism*, pb available from Haymarket).

*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.*¹⁴

This is a definition which is genuinely an advance on Marx's analysis of capitalism as a world-system (in large part because imperialism only came into full flowering after Marx's death).¹⁵ On the one hand, it *is* true that, in many respects, Lenin was simply a great "creative applier" of Marxian analyses to the unique kind of capitalism which obtained in Russia in the pre-World War I epoch. But as regards imperialism and the "national question", Lenin really did move beyond Marx and Engels, who sometimes (though infrequently) succumbed to what [Georgi Dimitrov called "national nihilism"](#)—a tendency to downplay or ignore the struggle against national oppression in favor of an abstract "internationalism" which denies oppression rooted in the dominance of one nation or ethnicity over another.¹⁶ Therefore, the meaning of Lenin's definition merits some further explanation.

Lenin's straightforward definition of the term "imperialism" is easy to understand in its literal sense. He gives a list of its most characteristic features in the [seventh chapter of *Imperialism, The Highest*](#)¹⁷ *Stage of Capitalism* as follows (modified for length):

1. The concentration of capital, typical of capitalist development, has created monopolies which play a key role in advanced capitalism
2. "the merging of bank capital with industrial capital", which merger Lenin calls "finance capital" after the Marxist economist Rudolf Hilferding
3. "the export of capital as distinguished from the export of commodities acquires exceptional importance"

¹⁴ Lenin, *Imperialism* ((1916), [Part VII](#)).

¹⁵ For a recent discussion which argues otherwise—i.e., that Marx did have a theory of imperialism which is analytically distinct from his general theory of capitalism—readers can consult Lucia Pradella, "Imperialism and Capitalist Development in Marx's *Capital*", *Historical Materialism* 21:2, (2013): 117-147 ([here](#)). We cannot agree with Pradella, however—while Marx showed great insight into imperialism as a nascent system, the basic framework of contemporary imperialism (which persists today) was established until after his death. So, predictably, his comments on imperialism are comments on its seeds rather than on its full flowering. While Marx was a true genius and though the tendency in some circles to let Lenin stand in for Marx in all matters is misguided, it is nevertheless true that Lenin made many original contributions to Marxist thought.

¹⁶ Since we regard Marx and Engels as great analysts of capitalism who are often subject to unfair slander, we would like to substantiate this remark: consider, for instance, the following passage from the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, undoubtedly Marx and Engels' best-known work: "The working men have no country [...]. National differences and antagonisms between peoples are daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world market, to uniformity in the mode of production". It's important to note, however, that this particular point in the evolution of Marx and Engels' views, though it *is* influential in parts of the left, is generally *unrepresentative* of Marx and Engels' mature views on this question. Actually, those more mature views (such as their support of progressive nationalist movements in the US Civil War, Ireland, and Poland) have fortunately been more influential on the main stream of socialist thinking on the national question. See Kevin Anderson's *Marx at the Margins* or Horace Davis' *Nationalism and Socialism* for more on this.

¹⁷ Originally, this read "*latest stage*", a not-insignificant modification. A good discussion of why this matters can be found in an editorial article published by *Monthly Review* [here](#).

4. the formation of international monopolist capitalist associations which share the world among themselves
5. “the territorial division of the whole world among the biggest capitalist powers is completed”

Readers of this essay have likely seen this definition before, and therefore we will not spend a long amount of time explaining each element point-by-point. We will instead clarify why Lenin thinks these elements are important and why they “hang together” in such a way that each piece forms only one part of a unified phenomenon. In fact, an exposition of the overarching purpose and logic of Lenin’s five criteria is missing from many discussions of his theory, even though Lenin insisted that “imperialism can and must be defined differently”—that is, more generally—“if we bear in mind not only the basic, purely economic concepts”. The two more general characterizations which Lenin adds to this list in *Imperialism* are that imperialism has an “historical place of this stage of capitalism in relation to capitalism in general” and that imperialism has a key relation to “the two main trends in the working-class movement” (i.e., between opportunism and revolutionary socialism).¹⁸ This explains why, in an article issued at almost the same time as *Imperialism* was published, Lenin actually *begins* with this more-holistic exposition of imperialism as “[monopoly capitalism: parasitic, or decaying capitalism: \[and\] moribund capitalism](#)”; this also explains why, in other places, Lenin argues that it is actually the “division of nations into oppressor and oppressed [which] [forms the essence of imperialism](#)”.

So, we begin our exposition with a holistic explanation of why Lenin isolates these five specific features of contemporary capitalism before going on to explain the meaning of the terms “parasitic or decaying capitalism” and “moribund capitalism”.

Why does Lenin select these five features of contemporary capitalism and term them “imperialism”? After all, as noted above, one can always win an argument by defining terms in a manner conducive to one’s own argument. Is Lenin simply picking a few arbitrary features of capitalism, calling them “imperialism”, and playing with words?

We think that Lenin’s argument is significantly deeper than that. Let’s begin by discussing Lenin’s use of the word “imperialism”. Why does Lenin use this word at all, in the first place? The answer is that it had then and has now a shared cultural meaning which is “thinner” (less detailed) than Lenin’s full definition, but which refers essentially to the same phenomenon: something *like* but not the *same* as an empire or a system of empires. In other words, Lenin is using a word that was and is now a term for a popular political concern; he is trying to make the term more rigorous and also to understand why it exists. So what is that most basic political concern? What *phenomenon* is Lenin trying to explain?

¹⁸ Readers can consult “[Imperialism and the Split in Socialism](#)” for more on Lenin’s view of these two trends.

The answer to this question is given by the etymology (linguistic history) of the word itself.¹⁹ Readers who speak a romance language will note that the word *imperialism* and its cognate in Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian (*imperialismo*) all look like the word *empire*, but English and most romance languages consider these two words different and non-synonymous ones. In fact, the word “imperialism” came to be used in the 19th century to mean something like “a form of international relations which *looks like* an empire in some ways, but which is not one”, well before Lenin began using the term. *Empire* generally refers to social arrangements in which one political territory formally governs other territories acquired through military conquest (or its threat) in a way that leaves those other territories with fewer rights, worsened conditions of life, a new language and/or religion, and so on. So, our answer is just that. Lenin used (and more precisely defined) the word “imperialism” in the way it was commonly used at this time: international relations in which there is significant inequality between different regions which is directly related to the political-economic domination of one over another, but without some of the key features that distinguished, for instance, the Roman or British empire (for instance, the imperialist activity of the United States in Latin America lacked many of the features of the British empire in India).

This leads us to a key idea: readers should think of Lenin’s definition of imperialism *not* as an arbitrary list of five features of capitalism that he personally found interesting or important but as a way of 1) theorizing what imperialism really *is* and 2) explaining *why* it exists. So, Lenin’s definition of imperialism not only makes the colloquial use of the word “imperialism” more precise, but it also includes a theory *in* the definition.²⁰ More precisely, the first four elements in Lenin’s definition, which are somewhat less obvious features, explain the fifth, which is the most obvious element and very likely a key feature of what most people mean by the word “imperialism”. His explanatory analysis, the first four elements of his definition, consists in an application of the Marxist theory of capitalist development to explain *how* it is that the fifth element comes about and how it is that imperialism comes to form its own *parasitic, moribund* stage of capitalism which brings with it a whole new form of class struggle, that of oppressed nations against oppressor nations. The characterization of imperialism as parasitic, as defined by oppressor-oppressed nation struggle, is more a theory of type 1) — explaining what something really *is* in a way that is not obvious. But for now, it is to the first, explanatory part of the analysis that we now turn.

Beginning with the first element, Lenin builds on Marx’s early insight that “[m]onopoly produces competition [and] competition [produces monopoly](#)”, Lenin—along with other writers such as Hilferding—notes the way in which the full

¹⁹ See fn. 13.

²⁰ This might sound complicated, but it really is not: virtually all useful social theory starts in the same way. While virtually all progressive people would agree that racism or national oppression is a serious concern in the United States, there is no way to offer a theory of it without first defining it rigorously since the word is used in so many heterogeneous ways (including some ways that many of would think of as being “wrong”, as in the case of “reverse racism”)—but of course, the process of defining racism, because it involves deciding what is and isn’t really racism, is also a process of analysis or “theory”.

development of competitive capitalism inevitably gave way to a highly concentrated and centralized form of capitalism, which he calls monopoly capitalism. Lenin does not use the term “monopoly” in a moralistic sense, as if competitive capitalism were somehow more “ethical”—in fact, he [castigated](#) his former mentor Karl Kautsky as “Proudhonist”²¹ for arguing this. Nor is Lenin arguing that monopoly completely displaces competition: instead, monopolies “exist above [competition] and alongside it, and thereby give rise to a number of very acute, intense antagonisms, frictions and conflicts” (Chapter VII, *Imperialism*).²² Instead, Lenin is simply saying that in the advanced capitalist countries, capital has become highly concentrated and centralized to a qualitatively new degree.

This leads to the second element, the development of finance capital. We leave aside this element of the theory for now: it is complex and it is the only area of Lenin’s theory that seems to us to be shaky (our critique, in short, is that it seems to be a mistaken to assume that the dominance of finance capital, meaning the fusion of banking and industrial capital, is necessary for imperialism to exist—our view is that any *type* of sufficiently centralized and concentrated capitals can form the basis of a mature, monopolized capitalism and can participate in the export of capital).

Regardless of *what* type of capital is exported, we can agree fully with Lenin that this third element, the export of capital to secure super-profits abroad, is characteristic of the imperialist countries. This is true empirically: the richest capitalist countries are responsible for the bulk of global foreign direct investment (FDI),²³ and only those countries manage to secure such massive profits from it (for a very “mainstream” paper on this phenomenon of differential rates of profit for exported capital depending on the origin of the flow, [see here](#); for a Marxist take, see [here](#) by Tony Norfield or [this](#) paper by David Yaffe). But this also makes sense “theoretically”: exporting capital abroad is costly, especially in a world without a global police force to protect the rights of capital—it makes sense that only rich countries with high-tech enforcers (their militaries) would be able to export much capital abroad and to do so on very favorable terms. It also makes sense that in countries economically devastated by past colonialism would be generally more welcoming of such investment, even on bad terms, and that, conversely, the terms for *developing* countries investing in the developed world would be largely unfavorable (e.g. the massive purchase of low- or no-interest US state debt by the People’s Bank of China—see Appendix 7.c).

Finally, it is obvious that, given what we’ve said above, there exists both a motive (the profit imperative) and the means (large treasuries and militaries willing to back

²¹ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon was an early “anarchist” thinker who, despite being venerated today by many anarchists, was essentially an incoherent anti-semitic who was a partisan of both “socialism” (in a limited sense) and “capitalism”. Many of Marx’s works, especially his earlier ones, are directed against Proudhon—for example, the hyperlink in the paragraph to which this footnote refers.

²² Lenin also criticizes the work of Bukharin, his younger comrade from whom Lenin supposedly borrowed most of his material in *Imperialism*, [for this very error](#)—that of overstating the disappearance of competition. For a discussion of this myth, see Kevin B. Anderson, *Lenin, Hegel and Western Marxism* (1995), p. 124 and onwards.

²³ FDI outflows from the developed world constituted between 70 and 90 percent of total flows between 2006 and 2016; see UNCTAD, [World Investment Report 2017](#), p. 13

them) for concentrated and centralized capitals to try to carve out as much territory as they can for this investment (whether or not this results in *formal* colonization of the rest of the world is not relevant here)—the fourth element of Lenin’s definition. In fact, not only is there a motive and a means, but there also exists a compulsion to do so. The cutthroat competition of capitalism and the lack of regulation (or “anarchy”) of competition between states compels large capitals and their states to go in search of super-profits elsewhere (or else another hostile country might get the jump on them and violently put them out of business); as Rosa Luxemburg put this idea, “[t]he international antagonisms of the capitalist states are but the complement of class-antagonisms, and world-political anarchy is [but the reverse side of capitalism’s anarchic system of production](#)”).²⁴

All of these elements taken together lead inexorably to the fifth element of Lenin’s definition, the one that we usually mean we talk about “imperialism” casually: the effective subjugation by the imperialist countries of large parts of the rest of the world for political-economic gain (although some larger states in the non-imperialist world, such as Iran, are able to [play off](#) rival European bloc and US imperialism fairly successfully).

For full clarity, this chain of argument is now summarized all at once, as follows: imperialism is an inevitable stage in the trajectory of the uneven development of capitalism; specifically, the age of imperialism came about when [capitalism came to full maturity in a handful of rich countries](#). Those rich countries are not only fully capitalist *internally* (in the sense that most social production is production for profit) but also have considerable global social influence, whether “military” or “economic” or “political”.²⁵ This allows massive monopolistic firms in those countries to undertake the considerable costs of exporting industrial capital to formerly-colonized countries with large pools of cheap labor which can be [super-exploited](#) (this labor is made cheap by the colonialist powers’ destruction of traditional modes of production in those countries). That same military might also allows financial firms—the big banks—to make loans (export money-capital) at massive rates of interest to these countries, since the military of the rich countries can effectively act as the enforcer for those firms, which would otherwise be subject to the laws of developing countries which might restrict this especially-parasitic form of capitalist activity. These large, monopoly firms not only *can* engage in this form of especially-lucrative capitalist production, but they are *impelled* to by the logic of competition amongst monopolies which are linked closely to their respective nation-states: just as the régime of capitalist property relations and the dependence of producers on unpredictable market forces producers in one country causes capitalists in that country to compete ruthlessly—lest another monopoly swoop in and out-compete it—so does a *global* régime of capitalist property relations compel national producers and their states to do

²⁴ Or, in the words of Utsa and Prabhat Patnaik, [“capitalism without imperialism is an impossibility”](#).

²⁵ We use scare-quotes here to remind the reader that social life really cannot be demarcated into separate political, economic, and cultural “regions”, even though Marx’s theory is often misread in precisely this way (e.g. by Althusser). It would require an entirely separate essay to spell this out, but the reader can see Lucio Colletti, [“Bernstein and the Marxism of the Second International”](#) (1969) or Derek Sayer’s *The Violence of Abstraction* (1987), both of which we highly recommend.

the same. This “economic” conflict leads to the political subjugation of by the imperialist powers and then outright military conflict eventually.

This now brings us to the “fuller definition” of imperialism which Lenin offered, one which is too-rarely included: imperialism as parasitic, moribund stage of capitalism which gives rise to the *central* structuring conflict between oppressor and oppressed nations, a form of national oppression “which has been extended and heightened on a new historical foundation” (“The Revolutionary Proletariat and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination”). It is these intertwined aspects of imperialism to “which most of the discussions on the subject usually attach insufficient importance” according to Lenin in 1916—a lack which persists today.

b. Imperialism as decaying, or parasitic capitalism, imperialism as oppressor vs. oppressed nation—the most important and most under-recognized aspects of Lenin’s theory

As we noted above, Lenin’s theory of imperialism is too often read in “economistic” terms, meaning that readers take Lenin to simply be noting some interesting trends in social production which arbitrarily come to form a new stage of capitalism. Our presentation above has already made clear why imperialism is not merely a name for a set of interesting facts, but a word used to summarize significant, era-defining shifts in capitalism’s form of existence, affecting all kinds of political and social phenomena, which are nevertheless *a logical outcome* of capitalist development.²⁶

We now summarize those features more generally: imperialism is an epoch of 1) decaying, or parasitic capitalism, and 2) of “national oppression, which has been extended and heightened on a new historical foundation”.²⁷

1. decaying, or parasitic capitalism: the world’s most powerful countries also tend to become those which specialize in the most socially-useless and historically-specific forms of capitalism: interest-bearing capital and commercial capital.²⁸ For that reason, capitalism in the advanced countries

²⁶ Though Lenin is often criticized by certain “ultra-left” socialists for failing to adhere [strictly](#) to Marx’s critique of capitalism which is presented in the first volume of *Capital*—which assumes a competitive capitalism—the bulk of the third volume of *Capital* is devoted to explaining why there are structural deviations from the laws of motion of capital presented in the first volume. In a sense, the very existence of bank capital, ground-rent and an average rate of profit represent permanent structural deviations from the “pure” capitalism presented in Vol. I.

²⁷ Readers will note that we above quoted Lenin’s “alternative” definition of imperialism as also including the claim that imperialism is monopoly capitalism and moribund capitalism. We leave these to one side here: while we value Lenin’s opinion greatly, and though he expressed ideas very clearly, he (like Marx) sometimes used different terms to mean basically the same thing. Here, monopoly capitalism is already well spelled-out by the fivefold common definition and “moribund capitalism” means only that the time has long since passed for a socialist revolution to be possible—neither of which are very controversial.

²⁸ While Lenin—following Marx—is careful not to suggest that banking is somehow separate from a pure, simple “industrial capitalism” to which we can somehow return (a theory associated with the far-right for whom “bankers” are a metonym for Jewish people), Lenin and Marx do rightfully note that these forms of capital represent “[the most externalised and most fetish-like form](#)” of the capital-relation. This is why Marx distinguished between forms of capital which perform some kind of function which *any* and *all* societies must

tends to have an especially socially-useless character. While all capitalist production involves a gap between what *is* and what *could be* had by regular people (we call this gap “exploitation”), some forms also involve a development of humankind’s productive powers and other progressive functions. Imperialism tends to do away with this progressive side of capitalism *because* it is parasitic (although Lenin is quick to point out that this “by no means [precludes](#) an extraordinarily rapid development of capitalism in *individual* branches of industry, in individual countries, and in individual periods”).

It leaves in place of the old, “rising”/quasi-progressive capitalism a “financialized”, service-sector capitalism which gets its industrial goods primarily from developing countries which have been colonized by the imperialist countries. Borrowing an extended passage from John Hobson, a “radical liberal” and non-Marxist who nevertheless had extremely keen insight into imperialism, Lenin describes the capitalism of the advanced countries, in Hobson’s stunningly prescient vision, as being like certain isolated parts of England around 1900, where all real *industrial* activity had migrated to other countries—“staple foods and manufactures flowing in as tribute from Asia and Africa”—leaving behind in advanced countries the following modified class structure: “little clusters of wealthy aristocrats drawing dividends and pensions from the Far East, with a somewhat larger group of professional retainers [middle-class professionals serving the wealthy]”, while the majority of the working class in that area worked as “personal servants and workers in the transport trade and in the final stages of production of the more perishable goods”. This is almost exactly how the situation in the advanced capitalist countries appears today.

2. Imperialism as national oppression “which has been extended and heightened on a new historical foundation”

Lenin’s analysis of what imperialism really *is* also involves a stress on the new forms of national oppression which spring up in this new historical epoch; in fact, we can only define “imperialist war”, the ultimate point of this essay, if we have this part of the analysis in mind. This, too, is an underrecognized part of Lenin’s theory of imperialism, even though it links up directly with one of the other subjects on which Lenin’s analysis was most original and lasting: the analysis of nationalism in general, spelled out in a slightly earlier phase of his revolutionary career.²⁹

have (production of socially-necessary goods, which industrial capital does in addition to exploiting workers and destroying the environment). In fact, Marx says that to confuse these two is to [make the grave error](#) of confusing production in general with capitalist production (because to confuse the transhistorical functions of capital with its historically-specific functions is to naturalize it).

²⁹ Amiya Kumar Bagchi, one of the few Marxists to, in our view, interpret Lenin’s theory of imperialism in a totally correct and generous way, writes: “*Imperialism* can be correctly understood only if it is read in intimate relation to his writings on the problem of self-determination of nations”. A.K. Bagchi, “Towards a Correct Reading of Lenin’s Theory of Imperialism”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 18, no. 31 (30 July 1983).

For reasons of concision, we can't spend too much time laying out the national question in Marxist thought or Lenin's take on it, but we should say what the basic idea is. First, Marx (inconsistently but usually), Engels (more consistently), and finally Lenin (most consistently) generally defended the right of nations to self-determination, meaning their own political state and territory, as a realistic and reformist demand worth defending by revolutionaries.³⁰ Some concrete examples of the national question and the accompanying demand for self-determination would be: Palestinian statehood, Irish independence, and the struggle of the Korean people for independence. Plenty of socialists (wrongly) opposed this demand as "chauvinist" or simply impossible, and there was great debate about it (which is reviewed in outline form in section 5), but for now it is sufficient to say that Lenin and many other revolutionaries took a pro-national liberation point of view.

What was often not fully understood, even by writers on nationalism who agreed with Lenin (such as [Stalin](#)), is that, though many struggles against national oppression in Western Europe were won successfully and fairly easily within the framework of a rising (non-imperialist) capitalism, the national question was not bound to fade away into insignificance as capitalism developed. On the contrary, the national question would actually become *more* intractable and national oppression *more* integral to capitalism, as capitalism developed into imperialism.³¹ Lenin's great contribution was to recognize this fact and analyze it.

It is not too difficult to see how the conflict between imperialist countries and oppressed and dependent countries would be central to imperialism; after all, we demonstrated above that imperialism essentially *is* the full flowering of capitalism in some, but not all, countries, which then colonize, formally or not, the remaining countries but we believe that this distinction is so important that we need to stress it. The specific *denial* of this element of Lenin's theory of imperialism forms part of the opportunist and white chauvinist critique of Lenin. All that remains is to define precisely the oppressed and dependent countries, taken up in appendix 7.b.

We are now finally ready to define imperialist wars (as against progressive wars).

c. Imperialist war and progressive war

³⁰ For a problematic but still-useful review essay of the history of the national question in Marxist thought, see Michael Löwy, "Marxists and the [National Question](#)". Much more reliable analytically, but longer and less tightly-focused, is Jim Blaut, [The National Question](#).

³¹ Stalin, for instance, argued in his famous 1913 work that the national struggle was "being reduced to a minimum" in America, although he later came to [adopt](#) Lenin's analysis and to [agree that Black people](#) in America constitute an oppressed nation.

Imperialist war, then, occurs when this struggle by the imperialist countries for resources and cheap labor morphs into open conflict *between* imperialist states (inter-imperialist wars) in a struggle to divide up those oppressed or dependent countries *or* when one imperialist country goes to war with an oppressed or dependent country for the same reason. The classic example of the former is WWI,³² while several examples of the latter are ongoing as of this writing (all of the “wars in the Middle East” prosecuted by the US count).³³ As the great social scientist W.E.B. Du Bois [wrote](#), a full year before Lenin’s classic pamphlet on *Imperialism* was released, imperialist war is “the result of jealousies engendered by the recent rise of armed national associations of labor and capital [in Europe] whose aim is the exploitation of the wealth of the world mainly outside the European circle of nations”.³⁴

Although the point has now been made implicitly, it is important to point out clearly, before going further, that imperialist wars are, like capitalism, specific historical products which have not always existed and will not always exist. In fact, imperialism is even more “historically specific” than capitalism in the sense that capitalism has not always been imperialist (except potentially, in the sense of “potential energy”). Even today, far from all capitalist countries are imperialist. Capitalist countries (or countries-in-the-making) can even fight *progressive* wars, if those wars are ones which throw off the yoke of domination by larger capitalist countries (what we call wars of independence or national liberation)—for example, the struggle of the ANC and SACP to end apartheid essentially was exactly that: although the ANC and the revisionist SACP were basically capitalist, if social-democratic parties, their struggle to end white South Africans’ racist domination of Black South Africans was basically a progressive war of national liberation. The fact that a given country is subject to the capitalist mode of production and has a capitalist state does not mean that that state cannot at times act in an objectively progressive fashion. As we pointed out above, this can come *either* as the result of worker militancy *or* simply out of the self-interest of a national bourgeoisie in an oppressed nation, which wants in on the loot, so to

³² World War II is a significantly more complicated case, which combined elements of inter-imperialist wars (the war between the Axis and the US/UK), the progressive defense of a socialist state (the USSR), and wars of national liberation (in countries occupied by fascists). A helpful discussion of WWII, one of the most complicated wars in the imperialist epoch, is [available here](#).

³³ The apparent fact of the cessation of war between the great powers—the US and Western Europe appeared to be, until the recent past, implacable allies—and the accompanying theory that war can be permanently ceased in the age of imperialism is criticized in [this excellent, comprehensive work](#) by Alec Abbott and in this similarly-excellent work [by David Levy](#). The short story is that the cessation of hostilities for a certain period of time makes, in no way, the prospect of inter-imperialist war possible. To quote Lenin’s critique of this exact argument: “[Peaceful alliances prepare the ground for wars, and in their turn grow out of wars](#)”. In fact, there are a great number of signs of growing imperialist conflict (Trump’s apparently erratic actions stoking this, like most of his disturbing policy maneuvers, cannot be dismissed as flukes of personal psychology), whether it was the signing of an historic [EU defense pact in 2017](#), Sweden’s [reintroduction of the draft](#), French President Macron’s calls to [reinstate the draft](#), and the EU’s new “European Defence Fund” [excludes US and UK firms](#).

³⁴ By “associations of *labor* and capital” (our emphasis), Du Bois means what Lenin called the labor aristocracy (a topic for another essay; good summary essays exist [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). This essay leaves out the labor aristocracy, although it is crucially important, since the basic points of this essay, already fairly long, can be made without reference to the labor aristocracy. Du Bois was extraordinarily prescient not only in his prediction of Lenin’s analysis but also in his reference to the labor aristocracy (although this concept, unlike the concept of imperialism, exists fairly developed in Engels’ later work—for references, see the essays linked above).

speak, of the oppressed workers who share that national bourgeoisie's language and culture.

The key difference is that *the imperialist countries*, all of which underwent wars of national liberation or unification at some point in the past, are now nearly incapable of pursuing progressive wars (and they are very capable of pursuing reactionary ones): the *one main condition* for the existence of such progressive-capitalist wars with reference to a given country (the national oppression of that capitalist country) does not have an objective basis in the imperialist countries.³⁵ In the absence of that condition, there is no real reason for a capitalist country to prosecute a progressive war: capitalists in countries with a highly-developed capitalism capitalists are extremely unwilling to pay for even the smallest expenses that do not benefit them; they only pay such expenses under extreme duress, and and even then they will never pay for anything which would effectively knock them down a peg on a global³⁶ scale or anything else which would fundamentally threaten the basic social hierarchy of the country or the world (unless literally forced to); the prosecution of an external, progressive war would be expensive and fundamentally deleterious to capitalists' long-run interests, and so the rich will basically not pay for such wars except in a literally revolutionary situation. What kinds of wars *do* they pay for then? Imperialist wars. Imperialist wars are conducted for "capitalist reasons", whether to take advantage of an opportunity for lucre, to set up a friendly political outpost, or to simply avoid being outcompeted by another country aiming at the same; even if they have incidental side-effects which are beneficial (for example, a tyrant in the oppressed country being knocked off), the aggregate effect is *either* unmitigated domination of an oppressed people by white capitalists or world war among the capitalists.³⁷

³⁵ These look very different in different countries; the U.S., Germany, and France all underwent "classical" wars of national liberation or unification, as did many small but parasitic members of the European imperialist bloc such as the Netherlands, Belgium, and Norway. England is something of an exception; although it was "colonized" many times before the early modern era, after the Norman invasion of the 11th century (before which England was not really the England we know today) it has never really been governed by an external power, although England certainly underwent a bourgeois revolution which involved national unification.

³⁶ This is important: while capitalists can tolerate *some* concessions to an unarmed working class in its own country, especially if it will quiet down after some reforms, it is significantly more dangerous to make concessions to a vicious rival imperialist power armed with guns and money.

³⁷ The only conditions under which those wars would have any progressive content would be if, during an *inter-imperialist* war, 1) one of the imperialist powers' victory could somehow be used to the advantage of a socialist country or an oppressed people *and* if 2) the leading bodies of the working class in those countries called for such support. This is what occurred in the second world war, although substantially less of the world is governed by the working class today, which makes this scenario far less likely. The main point of Lenin's analysis, penned shortly before the first successful socialist revolution in history, was to establish *for workers in the imperialist countries* why they should oppose their own country in inter-imperialist wars *rather than* to argue why it would be impossible for socialist countries to intervene successfully in an inter-imperialist war; the same is our purpose today (and no socialist country, or socialist party with a significant base in the oppressed countries, has called for workers to take sides in such a fashion lately). But more importantly, it is always forbidden for socialists to take sides in a war of one imperialist on an oppressed country, no matter the socialist justification (which is why "leftist" Kurdish parties' call for war on Syria must be regarded as an abandoning of socialism and not than a principled call to arms; at any rate, Syrian Communists generally disagree).

So, then, we have established what imperialism is and how it springs from capitalism operating on a world-scale; we have established what imperialist wars are; using the analysis of capitalism in general laid out above, we have established when and why capitalist countries can engage in progressive wars and, crucially, why imperialist countries which are politically independent and have a highly-developed form of capitalism cannot prosecute progressive wars (and why there *is* an objective basis for progressive wars in other countries, socialist or oppressed-capitalist, which the imperialist powers are trying to subdue). *This analysis of imperialism, first developed about a century ago, obviously (and unfortunately) is still irrelevant.*

5. The strategy which this analysis of imperialism implies today is a politics of not only socialist revolution but a politics of national liberation. [This is an unpopular opinion on many parts of the “left”](#), as the copious hyperlinks [suggest](#). In fact, it has long been a tradition among opportunists and right-wing social democrats that the national liberation struggle is a diversion or even that it is actively harmful when compared to the prospect of colonized people continuing to remain under imperial tutelage. One of the most influential right-wing “social democrats” of the 20th century, Eduard Bernstein of the SPD,³⁸ wrote that “only a *conditional* right of savages to the land occupied by them can be recognised” and thus that “[the higher civilisation ultimately can claim a higher right](#)” to the resources of the poor country. But we can set aside, for now, such openly debased arguments in favor of naked “‘socialist’ colonialism”, for the reason that frauds of the Bernstein type rarely frame their arguments so openly and proudly anymore.

We can instead focus on the two primary arguments which have primarily been made by “ultra-left” socialists, which have hardly changed in the last century. These arguments are 1) that national liberation struggles are [a concession to the chauvinism of the oppressed countries](#) and 2) that they [have become a practical impossibility](#) due to a supposed and unprecedented change in the global interconnectedness of capitalism. Both of these ideas can be found in works over a century old, in the writings of such [great revolutionaries as Rosa Luxemburg](#), or intelligent (if eclectic and unreliable) workers within the communist movement, [such as Nikolai Bukharin](#) or [Paul Mattick](#).

Yet, Lenin, and indeed the majority of the communist movement (including Marx and Engels, for the most part), considered the struggle for national liberation to be an integral strategy nested within the broader movement for socialism. It is easy enough, we think, to see why Lenin was right.

³⁸ *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (German Social Democratic Party). It is arguably the 20th century’s most influential socialist party—not only the world’s first Marxist party *and* the world’s first modern social chauvinist party (among which number almost all of the world’s parties which today go by the name “social democrats”), but also (through its) revolutionary wing a primary political influence on the Bolshevik Party.

a. Counter-argument one: “isn’t it wrong to support *any* kind of nationalism, even that of oppressed nations?”

To the first argument, that struggling for the self-determination of weak peoples is akin to endorsing the national chauvinism³⁹ of oppressed people, Lenin generally argued that in a situation in which one nation clearly oppresses the other, little harm can realistically come from “small nation chauvinism”. More specifically, *very* little harm can come from people who live in the oppressor nations tacitly endorsing “small-nation chauvinism” in their fight to destroy their own privilege. While Lenin counselled socialists in small nations to “[fight against small-nation narrow-mindedness, seclusion and isolation](#),” he remained resolute that in the oppressor nations, a greater emphasis “must necessarily be laid on their advocating freedom for the oppressed countries to secede and their fighting for it”.

To make this concrete with reference to a more familiar and intimate issue than that of Syria, consider the case of the recent [white liberal](#) outrage over the [so-called “Black chauvinism”](#) or “reverse racism” of groups like the Nation of Islam: while there is much to legitimately criticize about such reactionary groups,⁴⁰ their “anti-white racism” is not something that any white people have the moral right to spend more than a moment criticizing, for the simple reason that the harm done by whites to Black people is immeasurably greater than the reverse. No socialist can treat these two forms of chauvinism as equivalent, or take a “neither *x* nor *y*” approach to this question, without acting as an apologist for white chauvinism. Such “small nation chauvinism” is an obvious reaction to the far, far more materially-efficacious racism of the oppressor nation, and the duty of non-Black peoples is, at present, to simply smash anti-Black racism, full stop. To sum up, these same principles which most communists and progressives understand very well on a national level—everyone understands how foolish it is for progressives to spend time fretting about “Black-on-white racism”—should simply be applied more consistently on an international level. Syria and other oppressed countries have the right to self-determination. To deny this because socialists wish to one day destroy nationalism altogether is akin to insisting that non-heterosexual couples should not be allowed to marry one another simply because the institution of marriage may someday be made obsolete by socialism. In the case of Syria, this kind of “opposition to ‘small-nation chauvinism’” often takes the form of “anarchists” delightedly pointing out the fact that Syria’s current borders are themselves the result of an imperial carve-up of the region which ignored the long demographic dispersion of

³⁹ A friend of the authors asked us, reasonably, to provide a definition of “chauvinism” after seeing a draft of the article. We mean by this a very general thing: a preference for one’s own people, however defined, which has no legitimate basis in fact or a need for self-defense. This includes hardcore racism but it can also include petty prejudice between or against members of oppressed nations. It generally does not refer to self-defense based group-preference (e.g. if a Black person does not wish to attend a mostly-white school out of a reasonable fear of assault), but it’s possible for certain kinds of justified oppressed-group bias to be given a chauvinistic justification (often built on simple inversions of racist or sexist ideas), even if the preference itself is not. It is in this sense in which small nation chauvinism can be real (compare, for instance, certain strands of feminist thinking which, in arguing against gender oppression, invert and celebrate male sexist ideas that women are “natural” child-rearers, even though many women do not or cannot give birth or rear children).

⁴⁰ For instance, while whites will basically do no good by railing on about the NOI’s “reverse racism”, Farrakhan’s antisemitism should be sharply criticized in public by progressive forces.

peoples in the region (the Sykes-Picot treaty). Thus, it is said, any defense of Syria's borders [is a form of irrational, or even colonial, chauvinism](#) since those borders are imperfect. While the current borders of Syria *are* no doubt imperfect in many ways—and thus a militant defense of them necessarily involves defending those imperfections and perhaps a kind of chauvinism—it would be absurd to not see this defense as the lesser of two chauvinisms.

b. Counter-argument two: “doesn’t globalization make the nation-state irrelevant? why should anyone care about a struggle that seems so unlikely to succeed in current conditions?”

The second argument, that the demand for self-determination is not possible under capitalism, sounds plausible enough at first—after all, as progressives we do generally recognize the difficulty of carrying out progressive demands within the constraints of capitalism. But, we agree with Lenin when he points out that there are actually [two kinds of demands](#) that socialists carry forward before the struggle for socialism is won. It is true that *one* variety of demand simply cannot be realized under capitalism and instead plays the role of a “transitional demand”, i.e., a demand which mobilizes people but whose full implementation implies the end of capitalism: as an example, Lenin provides the case of the introduction of labor-money or a comprehensive democratic management of social production.⁴¹ In effect, this kind of demand is that which would require the total overcoming of capital and the market—indeed, of money itself, of the value-form— and they obviously cannot within capitalism. By definition, to achieve them would be to end capitalism.

But, importantly, there is another kind which *may* be realized under capitalism, at least in some ways: for instance, the ending of formal-legal slavery, the winning of a democratic republic—in short, anything in the category which Marxists refer to as “bourgeois right”. While these sorts of rights are limited, and while true justice—which [implies equity rather than simple equality](#)—cannot be achieved through them alone, this does not mean that such rights are literally impossible to achieve. While Lenin was careful to stress that imperialism could never be fully ended within the confines of capitalism, he also polemicized against those who insisted that there was simply no possibility of *any* kind of decolonization whatsoever within capitalism: he returned again and again to the successful example of [Norway](#), and today we could point to far more examples, from South Africa to India to Angola to Vietnam. None of these countries have overcome the constraints of the world-market, of course, but all of them are *far* better off for having overthrown their colonial masters, even if they do not enjoy “deep self-determination” in the sense of being truly independent of capitalism—formal self-determination is still a clear advance.

⁴¹ The question of labor-money, an appealing but ultimately wrong-headed reform, is dealt with at length in Marx's own works, especially the *Grundrisse* (the unpublished, sprawling, loose rough draft for *Capital* as a whole) and the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (the published and concise rough draft for the first section of *Capital*). The activist-scholar Roman Rosdolsky argues that Marx's critique of the labour-money scheme “forms a very important element of” Marx's own theory of money (*Making of Marx's “Capital”*, p. 108). The economist Alfred Saad-Filho summarizes Marx's [position here](#) concisely and accurately.

In fact, Lenin argued that the *denial* of the right to self-determination by some socialists formed a crucial element of the [split within the socialist movement](#), which pitted revolutionaries against opportunists. The former wing saw clearly the importance of waging a struggle against racism and national chauvinism *within* the workers movement; the other wing, corrupted by imperial privilege (in both a literal and moral sense), scoffed at the demand for decolonization as a pipe-dream. Following Lenin, we argue that it is in fact an important component of anti-racist practice for people living in the imperialist countries to argue and organize forcefully for the right of self-determination of oppressed countries. Foreshadowing later Marxist writing on white privilege, Lenin argued that “the duty of giving [national liberation movements] help belongs *primarily to* the workers of the country on which the backward nation is colonially or financially dependent”.⁴² It is a solemn duty of workers with national privileges to fight for those privileges to be abolished, even as those workers simultaneously fight for their own rights.

US-UK-France-Israel-Turkey — hands off Syria!

6. Addendum

- a. DSA — official statement
- b. DSA — prominent leaders
- c. ISO — official statement
- a. The above presentation has been fairly abstract, so we now look in depth at the discussion of the responses of the Democratic Socialists of America and International Socialist Organization to US imperialism’s war on Syria make things more concrete.

Though the Democratic Socialists of America has not released any statement about the April 2018 strikes (as of 30 June 2018, 78 days later), nor the more recent (unconfirmed but likely) US strikes on Syrian government military positions, [the DSA’s statement from last April’s attacks](#) provides an example of this phenomenon: the statement opposed the strikes *only* on the grounds that they would cause collateral damage: “U.S. air power cannot surgically take out those individuals who can deploy such weapons” but would instead only “kill many innocent civilians”. This is the *sole* justification for being against the bombings which the organization provides in its official statement. While this claim is indeed true, it leaves completely to one side 1) whether the United States should be in the business of murdering other countries’ leaders in the first place; and, 2) whether the US state’s motivations in prosecuting a war on Syria are as benign as the US state says that they are. The correct answers to those two questions, of course, are “no” and “they’re not”. In short, the DSA statement is alarming *both* because it offers only a weak criticism of the war and casually accepts the US state’s lies, *but also* because it offers up a vague and untenable pacifism. After all, it is true that some wars *are*, in fact, righteous; and, it is true that *all* wars involve negative, unintended consequences. An approach like the

⁴² Translation modified for readability; italics are mine—J.S.

DSA's makes it impossible for socialists to distinguish between progressive and reactionary wars; if the criterion is that no war may be fought which involves unintended consequences, then the DSA would have been obliged to oppose the Civil War, for instance.⁴³ We argue here that this is inadequate (and it completely ignores an important body of Marxist writing on war): we argue instead that the real task is differentiating the *kinds* of wars: determining their social character and, from there, determining how communists should relate to them.

- b. This same inadequacy [animates an unofficial, but widely-circulated and open call for war on Syria](#), penned by one Tristan Slougher (a member of DSA and the coauthor, with Jason Schulman, of "The Case for Solidarity with the Syrian Revolution", a [piece](#) which appeared on the DSA website and was greeted with a great deal of internet backlash). Its open support of the US war machine called into question the claim that the DSA's dalliance with imperialism was a [blip](#) in their distant past (although in fairness, the DSA's "democratic" approach to publishing means that there is apparently no genuinely-democratic requirement that pieces appearing on the DSA website reflect anything like a majority of the group's opinion, as was the case with [this truly bizarre "Yellow Scare" article from February 2018](#) which almost no other DSA members seemed to find reasonable).⁴⁴ Schulman is notorious for his online misconduct, which we can only describe as "MRA meets DSA",⁴⁵ and he was a signer to an open letter on Syria which, in the most underhanded and sheepish way possible, [calls for the US to break international law and "forcibly end" the Syrian war](#), which means either a mass bombing campaign or a ground invasion, carried out by [a government to which Hitler looked for inspiration](#).

Slougher has hubris enough to call for the DSA to "reject imperial rhetoric on Syria", even though Slougher himself is literally pleading for the world's largest imperialist power to illegally invade Syria, writing that he does not mind that thousands of US troops are illegally occupying Syria because they are "embedded with mostly Kurdish forces fighting the same forces we are told Assad and Russia must defeat"—the question of whether the US is really "fighting ISIS" aside, this leaves completely to one side the problem that the US [has invaded Syria, occupied huge swathes of the country, and begun the process of stealing its resources outright](#), in violation of the Syrian government's claims (imperfect as that government is, to violate its national sovereignty is obviously to violate the main form of collective will that Syrians

⁴³ We provide here a very generous interpretation here of the DSA position—in fact, the group is not even pacifist in a utopian sense, which would be bad enough, but instead it has often advocated war outright, making its pacifist arguments somewhat disingenuous.

⁴⁴ This particular problem—minority voices within a party speaking over or for the majority in the party press, without democratic debate resolving the matter—is one reason why we not only support the Leninist theory of imperialism but also the Leninist mode of organization—[democratic centralism](#).

⁴⁵ Unfortunately for critical observers, Schulman deleted his old Twitter account (@PartyOfANewType), where he broke bread with people like @pyotr_kropotkin (also deleted), an "anarchist" and overt misogynist who regularly told women that they were "[making themselves less attractive](#)" [slightly paraphrased] to him by disagreeing with him (such tweets were often "faved" by Schulman). Schulman's account was a remarkable catalogue of the bizarre political character of "old school DSA-ism", which is often to the right of the left wing of the Democratic Party, sometimes to the right of former US president Barack Obama. It is unsurprising that the @PartyOfANewType account was shuttered, even though Schulman immediately returned to Twitter activity under a different handle—his conduct was simply an embarrassment even to a chauvinist like himself.

possess at the moment—note that Russia’s non-imperialist government, on the other hand, has been invited in by Syrian officials, virtually against Putin’s will).⁴⁶

We now want to step back briefly and characterize more generally the kind of “anti-war” and “anti-imperialist” politics which Slougher is pushing, common as they are on virtually all of the US left (except among those who explicitly uphold Lenin’s analysis—and even then, some “Leninists” like the ISO badly misunderstand his arguments).

Slougher’s article relies heavily on the US brand of “antiwar” politics common in the 2000s, on which we, too, were reared, before we broke with those politics. There are several errors which flow from this kind of critique, and common source. The main error is that this analysis takes seriously the idea that the US is really conducting a “war on terror”, one motivated by self-defense and therefore aimed at eliminating terrorists which genuinely pose a threat to the United States. This causes critics of war to 2) object to war largely on procedural grounds⁴⁷ since no-one could object to the fight against terrorism in the abstract. This leads to 3) a severe downplaying of the very real role the US plays as a major *sponsor* of terrorism. In general, 4) this perspective has no serious analysis of international relations and, even if its proponents may subjectively dislike capitalism to some degree, they tend not to use a very serious or detailed analysis of it in their approach to understanding US foreign policy. This is the common source of the problems.

Briefly, we can spell out the problems with this approach, focusing on the first assumption. To put a fine point on it, the US state is not especially concerned with terrorism, both in the sense that it generally does not care about the welfare of its own citizens all that much (and faced virtually no backlash when a terrorist attack did happen—quite the opposite) and also in the sense that US openly and cynically sponsors [major funders](#) of [far-right](#) groups the world over, which is how it came to pass that the few groups which have carried out terrorist attacks on US soil have largely been its former proxies. At best, terrorist attacks on US soil result from the following: the US carelessly funds these groups, the groups “go rogue”, and yet the US pays almost no heed to the possible “boomerang effect” (i.e., terrorist attacks on US soil); any state that truly cared about stopping such terrorism would simply stop funding the groups. At worst, the US consciously allows these groups a significant amount of latitude in their actions, possibly because the political effect produced by a constant public fear of terrorism is one which imperialist states find useful.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Russia’s relative lack of interest in intervening and its non-imperialist, though capitalist, character are tightly related, as the reader might assume. Despite obvious problems with the source and tone, [this article from Vox](#) basically makes this case—correctly.

⁴⁷ E.g. “they’re being careless with missile strikes” or “the president is not going through Congress” or “the jet pilots aren’t even *in* the jet anymore”.

⁴⁸ While this may strike the reader as a “conspiracy theory”, such active encouragement by the imperialist states of far-right activism (and passive tolerance of their actions) was a key feature of the NATO stay-behind mission often referred to as “[Operation Gladio](#)”. In recent years, evidence has accumulated that terrorist attacks [in Berlin](#), in [Manchester](#), [Orlando](#) (FL) and a failed instance [in New York](#) were carried out or being plotted by individuals very well-known to intelligence services.

This compact version of the argument is verified that if one looks at the two major invasions carried out by the US in the 2000s which were supposedly carried out in the name of fighting terrorism, during which this kind of mistaken analysis of US imperialism virtually became dominant. We see one situation (Iraq) where the official US state justification—that its opponent was funding Islamist terror—is simply and utterly [implausible](#) to anyone familiar with the region. And, we see another situation in which the US attacked a far-right religious government in a country where it itself had sponsored far-right religious fundamentalists (Afghanistan). While there is a superficial plausibility to the argument that the US was really “fighting terror” (or at least, showing its might) in the latter case, such explanation fails to say why the US troops went to Afghanistan at all (a costly and complicated strategy for revenge and a far over-complicated strategy for genuinely preventing terror). Moreover, the war which the millionaire “simple Texas fella” deemed the [“central front in the war on terror”](#) simply and obviously had nothing to do with fighting far-right religious terror, but instead was everything to do with [disciplining a naughty proxy](#).

This general approach to analyzing terrorism is how Slougher is able to suggest that the United States is conducting airstrikes in Syria with the primary purpose of combating terrorism—the idea that the United States really is after “terrorism” is simply part of the jargon of US liberalism, now, and virtually all criticism in that quarter of the “war on terrorism” has become procedural. All historical memory, even the very fact that US is the *world’s largest sponsor of right-wing terrorism*—this is lost. This is in spite of the fact that Slougher’s own protagonist, the military-industrial complex, tells a different story about what the US is up to in Syria: a memo released by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA, an agency of the Department of Defense) recovered through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) unambiguously [states that](#) “the Salafist [*sic*], the Muslim Brotherhood, and AQI [al-Qaeda] are the major forces driving the insurgency in Syria”, that “the West, Gulf countries [*sic*], and Turkey support the opposition”, and that “there is the possibility [in Syria] of establishing a...Salafist principality in eastern Syria (Hasaka and Der Zor [*sic*]), and this is exactly what the powers supporting to [*sic*] the opposition want”. This is consistent with the way in which US diplomats have long [strategized explicitly in their cables](#), no longer secret, about destabilizing Syria.

- c. Finally, we turn to the International Socialist Organization (ISO). Though the ISO claims that it stands against the war, the organization offers no coherent, compelling reason for being against the war. What they offer instead is the disingenuous and confusing claim that they are against the strikes because those strikes failed to [prevent “the Assad regime” from “carr\[ying\] out a slaughter”](#). This variety of argument reminds one of an old joke about a diner at a restaurant who complains that “the food is terrible *and* there’s not enough of it!”—the bombs are bad *and* there weren’t enough! The ISO statement logically and directly implies that there is a problem here—a [“savage” and “barbaric”](#) dictator—which the US should, can, and is likely to solve; the only problem, then, is that it is carrying out this civilizing mission in the wrong way. The ISO statement forcefully implies that it is possible that the US *would* bomb Syria out of the goodness of its heart, in order to prevent some (hypothetical,

highly-improbable)⁴⁹ slaughter and that this is the world we should try to bring about—the group completely ignores the actual reasons that the US state goes to war, even if the statement calls those motives into question in passing elsewhere. The statement thereby gives support to the narrative that the US is trying honestly to “do the right thing” (even if the ISO claims that it rejects this narrative) because it fails to stress how completely unrealistic it is to expect US imperialism in 2018, without serious challenge, to “do the right thing”. And despite its claims to be skeptical of the US state’s motives, the organization [readily and without any compunction accepts the veracity of unproven claims](#) about the Syrian government made by the US state, even as these have [now come under serious doubt](#). It often offers what are, in effect, conspiracy theories about the United States’ goals in Syria, which all available evidence suggests consist in the violent domestication of an independent capitalist country: instead the ISO argues that the strikes are actually intended to “allow the Assad régime to remain strong enough to head off revolutionary change”.

What revolutionary change? Well, the ISO openly cheers the Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate in the Syrian civil war whom it regards as [“decent revolutionaries”](#) who have, at worst, made minor mistakes⁵⁰—in direct continuity with the politics of their party’s long-time UK affiliate,⁵¹ which once gushed that the mujahideen, a fascist gang of rural notables and a direct organizational precursor to al-Qaeda, were [“brave freedom fighters giving their lives in a struggle against \[Soviet\] imperialism”](#), whom “the left” should have fought with in order to provide “a space for the left to work in”.⁵²

Even apart from these severe misjudgments of the character of Syrian “revolutionaries”, the larger problem is that none of the ISO’s attention is paid to the overwhelming fact that the US simply has imperialist aims in Syria and that this means that, whatever else one thinks about Syria, the United States intends to colonize it in the way it has done Iraq and Afghanistan—this point is either obscured or questioned with elaborate, pro-US conspiracy theories.⁵³ While the authors of *Socialist Worker* pieces perfunctorily recite their skepticism of the US state’s humanitarian motives, the main focus of *SW*’s Syria articles is to promote the claim that the United States is [actually attempting to provide support for the elected](#)

⁴⁹ Readers can consult [this report by Ted Postol of MIT](#) for an empirical critique of the Trump White House’s narrative about the 2017 attacks; any insistence that they happened in a way that is meaningfully similar to the way described by Trump must address Postol’s critique in full.

⁵⁰ [Readers can judge this claim for themselves](#). The author of this piece, Michael Karadjis, has also [written articles in which he argues](#) that it is morally acceptable for “Free Syrian Army” commanders to film themselves murdering and then consuming the heart tissue of Hezbollah fighters.

⁵¹ The two parties formally ceased their relationship in 2003 but each now preaches roughly the same politics—at any rate, the piece in question was written before the two groups split.

⁵² The same piece admits, amazingly, that the mujahideen were “bigots” and “careerists with the backing of the CIA” who had “contempt for the poor”) while still seeing collaboration with this group as the lesser of two evils. It completely beggars belief that Trotskyists somehow can assert that Marxist-Leninists should be ashamed of militarily supporting progressive bourgeois politicians in oppressed nations, even as they support reactionary right-wing fundamentalists. It is open hypocrisy and, worse, simply wrong.

⁵³ It is also a serious analytical error to suppose that, unless the US is actively bombing a given country without end, it is “just playing around” and is not serious about its imperialist aims. This would mean that, in virtually all of Latin America, in Iran, in Russia, and so on, the United States is not “serious about régime change”, merely because it has not yet conducted an all-out assault on the country in question.

[government of Syria by publicly threatening the entire country with annihilation and by funding far-right opposition groups](#) (even as US leaders refer to the Syrian leader in overtly racist language as [an “animal”](#)).⁵⁴

7. Appendix

A. On the difficult task of defining a “nation” — methodological notes

These notes pertain to the discussion of nations, which are crucial to Lenin’s definition of imperialism. The question of what a nation really *is* is a very difficult one, but fortunately the debate around this question rarely implies a serious analytical difference. Here, we decide to address and try to clarify some of these difficulties in case it proves useful to the reader. **The next few paragraphs contain a digression on methodology which can be skipped if it does not interest the reader.** The essay resumes by defining these keys terms for Lenin in the paragraph in the next letter.

One reason for this is the wide range of *ways* in which the term is used, and not just the different definitions. Many times, when we speak of “nations” or other weighty and (ostensibly) fuzzy social scientific concepts, we are using it in a general, vague way with a minimal, loose definition. In other words, in such case we are defining nation using a process of formal abstraction. Formal abstraction means for us the process of defining something by listing, in a more-or-less arbitrary fashion, a set of criteria which the speaker believes to be essential to the thing. This is basically how Stalin’s [famous definition of a nation](#) works. This procedure of *formal* abstraction is not necessarily invalid; it may be a useful way of grouping together various different phenomena which all share important characteristics which does not exclude too many things which people think should be included and vice versa. But there are also important limitations of the process formal abstraction; the philosopher Tony Smith, who works on Marx, notes two. First, the process of selecting criteria which define a concept rests “upon a *subjective* cognitive process”, which is necessarily error-prone; and second, the process of formal abstraction therefore might select superficial shared characteristics: “the common feature may not have anything whatsoever to do with the inner nature of the phenomena being examined”.⁵⁵

It is worth noting, then, that Marx’s method *usually* is not that of formal abstraction; he famously rejected this kind of procedure in the beginning of his rough draft for *Capital*, the *Grundrisse*, by [arguing against](#) a methodology which begins with broad, general concepts which spark lots of debate about what should or should not be included in the list of essential characteristics.

Marx instead insisted on beginning his research by observing reality, attempting to reduce reality to as few simple (or “abstract”) ideas as possible, figuring out how those ideas fit

⁵⁴ It is worth noting that the ISO also uses this kind of racist language—the Syrian president is called a “savage” and a “barbarian” in its articles linked above. Even if the ISO position was the politically correct one, this language would be completely inexcusable. The word “savage”, in particular, is not even used in polite bourgeois society any more since it is distinctively linked to the genocide of indigenous peoples in what is now the US and Canada.

⁵⁵ Tony Smith, *The Logic of Marx’s Capital: Replies to Hegelian Criticisms* (1990), p. 69.

together to produce social mechanisms and processes, and then verifying that the description of these mechanisms describes reality well. By doing so, we are better posed to eliminate accidental or superficial features of reality from our model (at the cost of producing fairly simple and abstract models). This is sometimes surprising to readers, who may expect a well-known intellectual like Marx to have had a taste for “big ideas” or “profound concepts”. But, again, the opposite is the case. For instance, Marx famously begins *Capital* not with a discussion of or “capital” or “value” or “class” or “capitalism” —the topics one expects the book to cover and which it does get round to eventually—but “the commodity”, a rather vulgar and every-day concept, which is then used to explain what capital is and then what the capitalist mode of production is.⁵⁶ Again, this is opposed to the method of formal abstraction which *does* proceed by starting with big, concrete ideas which have unclear definitions or criteria, making them clearer by deciding (at the whim of the writer, however reasonable that whim is or isn’t) what will or won’t be included in the definition, and then seeing how well reality fits those ideal-types. Marx, instead, *generally* proceeds by way of *observing* reality, logically deducing the most fundamental mechanisms or aspects of a thing, and then using them to explain more complicated aspects of the thing. Generally speaking, Marx tries to *observe* real, not formal, abstractions (the *real*, not merely mental, *processes* which produce similar-seeming social objects) and to then describe how those work. He does this to avoid the messy process whereby one categorizes reality like a record collector might arrange their LPs: first by artist, then by year, then by genre—in a word, haphazardly.

This digression may still seem very vague, so let us provide a clear example in the context of a nation: Marx, though he never wrote on “the nation” theoretically, may well have defined as a nation as “any group of people which has undergone the process of nation-making”, instead of defining a nation as a group of people which checks certain boxes. Of course, it may be true (and probably is, in the case of Stalin’s definition) that the two procedures amount to more-or-less the same working definition for certain terms. Perhaps only nations which fit Stalin’s criteria even *can* undergo the process of nation-making. But, other times, this difference matters quite a lot: for instance, a formal-abstract definition of capitalism might fixate on the presence of money or wage-labor, two undoubtedly *essential* elements, but because many societies have known the existence of money and wage-labor, and not merely those which existed during the period of time which most people have agreed to call capitalism (roughly: the 16th century of Western Europe and its colonies onwards), this procedure would fail us here. Instead, Marx’s method is more reliable—Marx defines capitalism by, effectively, determining what it is about capitalism that we care about (the phenomena), describing how various social processes produce those phenomena, and then determining what elements are essential to that process—this, finally, is the definition that we will actually use for the phenomenon. This kind of materialist theory asks us to observe reality, figure out its most basic elements, and then use logic to figure out how those basic elements combine into social processes which produce the object of analysis.

⁵⁶ One could argue that “the commodity” is itself a concept, in the sense that almost all English-language nouns are somewhat abstract in that they refer to objects beyond the immediate present. In this sense, Marx is being imprecise when he [claims](#) that “I not proceed from ‘concepts,’ [but] the simplest social form in which the product of labour presents itself in contemporary society”. Setting aside this problem, we can agree with Marx that he generally begins with simple, uncontroversial concepts which reflect a visible, everyday reality, in order to reconstruct (or, as necessary, discard) more complex ideas.

Returning again to the context of nations and nationalism, **we generally decide to mean by “nations” any group of people which has undergone the process of nation-making (the “real abstraction” definition)—since nations are social constructs, anything which most people agree is a nation is one. If we were to offer a formal abstraction which tells us what kinds of features are generally understood to be criteria for nation-making, we would say: there is almost always some combination of language; cultural lifeways; religion; and physical proximity of members to one another**—a definition similar to Stalin’s. Typically, no single one of these features can on its own constitute a nation.⁵⁷

Essentially, Stalin’s formal abstraction is basically a good guide here, although it is important to note that a nation is an historical and social construct which is not a “natural” feature of human society and which thus cannot ever be described in a permanent manner in the way that “carbon” or “a duck” can be (Stalin’s definition also takes this into account). Stalin’s definition also, predictably, does not describe well (although it does not deny or downplay) the synthetic creation of nations through the process of colonization and forced migration (this process was absent from large swaths of the world, including those closest to Russia, so this absence is not totally surprising or problematic).

B. Lenin’s definitions of oppressed colonial, semi-colonial, and dependent nations

For Lenin, the oppressed nations are the colonial and semi-colonial nations, although he also distinguishes the category of *dependent* nations which are also victims of imperialism but which enjoy full political independence in the bourgeois sense. Lenin never systematically brings these categories into discussion in the same article, so we have taken liberties and decided to synthesize his various writings to produce this fourfold inventory of types of nations.

Colonial nations has a commonsense meaning for Lenin: nations formally (i.e., legally) governed by other nations (for the difficult question of what a nation is, see appendix 7.A directly above if desired). Lenin, to our knowledge, never formally defines this term, but he never uses it in a way which would contradict its common literal meaning. Typically, Lenin does not use the term “colonial” in the way often used by partisans of the “settler-colonialism” lens for analyzing imperialism (for better or worse). So, while Lenin does identify, for instance, Black Americans as an [oppressed nation](#), he does not identify them as a colonial nation so far as we can tell, although the difference may only be nominal.⁵⁸ Outright colonialism is rare in the post-1970s epoch, after most of the African continent was liberated, but today the examples of Puerto Rico and Palestine remain crucial exceptions to this trend.

By semi-colonial nations, Lenin seems to have in mind countries which are to some degree under the formal control of another country, but which the other country has not formally

⁵⁷ Note that, in many cases, religion and cultural lifeways go hand-in-hand, and they thus do not function as “independent variables” here. In fact, if this cluster of features is *not* combined with linguistic differences and/or significant differences in privileges assigned to or taken from this group, *and* this cluster *is* combined with political unification and frequent contact with other groups, these differences are typically “simply ethnic” ones. This is true for Italian Americans, for instance.

⁵⁸ One of Lenin’s greatest American students, the Black communist Harry Haywood, *does*, in passing, describe Black America as “a kind of ‘internal colony’ of American imperialism”. See [Negro Liberation](#) (1948), 146.

declared their “protectorate”. Lenin frequently refers to the situation of the same three countries in the late 1910s—Turkey, China, and “Persia” (Iran)—as semicolonial.⁵⁹ This list sometimes includes Egypt, India, and “Indochina” (Continental Southeast Asia).⁶⁰ The meaning of this term is little explored in Lenin’s work, appearing, by our count, only a couple dozen times, not before the summer of 1915 (“Socialism and War”) and not after January 1917 (“Statistics and Sociology”) (although it *is* used in virtually all of his most important work on imperialism). In *Imperialism*, Lenin gives the fullest definition: a form of partial state subjection which does not involve a complete “loss of the political independence of the subjected countries and peoples” as colonization does.⁶¹ It seems to us that a great number of nation-states in the present epoch fit this definition: the Republic of Korea, Colombia, and México—all very large nations—are countries whose security services and military are so heavily imbricated with US state officials that they are virtually colonies of the United States.

Colonial and semi-colonial nations, however, are only a part of an overall group of dependent nations which are united by the fact that they are, as it were, *objects* rather than *subjects* of imperialism. Even countries which have completed a full bourgeois-democratic revolution may not necessarily be free of the strictures of imperialism. In fact, according to Lenin, there exist “[diverse forms of dependent countries which, politically, are formally independent, but in fact, are enmeshed in the net of financial and diplomatic dependence](#)”, of which semi-colonial countries are one type.⁶² The other types to which Lenin refers seem to involve various highly-concrete cases (such as the Portugal and Argentina of his day, not altogether different from those nations in our own day), so we summarize these cases as “formally-independent, really-dependent nations”.

So, in sum, for Lenin there exist many “undeveloped, backward and oppressed nations”⁶³ which require national liberation on the path to socialism; these include two primary types, colonial and semi-colonial countries (the latter of which form perhaps *most* of the world’s states, in both number and population, today); and, finally, all of these are more generally subsumed by the category of *dependent* nations, which includes the rare nation which has undergone (and maintained) a complete bourgeois revolution (in fact, Syria before the open eruption of the war of reconquest is a good example).

C. On balances of trade and certain misguided rejections of Lenin’s framework

In this section, we briefly address a common criticism of Lenin’s emphasis on the export of capital which runs something like the following: the United States is actually a net *importer* of

⁵⁹ This list appears in “[Socialism and War](#)” (written summer 1915), “[The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination](#)” (written January-February 1916), “[Imperialism, the Highest State of Capitalism](#)” (written January-June 1916), and “[The Junius Pamphlet](#)” (written July 1916).

⁶⁰ Egypt, India, and “Indochina” all appear in *Imperialism* at different points, although they are left out of the first list. India makes an appearance in “[A Caricature of Marxism and Imperialist Economism](#)” (written August-October 1916).

⁶¹ Section VI of *op. cit.*

⁶² Obviously, Lenin’s model is one (generally unacknowledged) source of world-systems theory’s “core / periphery / semi-periphery” model, as Jim Blaut notes [here](#), but it is interesting to note (which he does not) that the very word “dependent” as a catch-all term for any countries which generally benefit relatively less from imperialism seems to be taken directly from Lenin.

⁶³ “A Caricature...”

capital and therefore no longer imperialist; in fact, countries like China are actually the real net exporters of capital and at least the equal of US imperialism. Finally, some other authors simply make an attempt to downplay the meaningfulness and size of imperialist investment in the oppressed countries, since foreign direct investment (FDI) generally flows to advanced capitalist countries; as the late SWP-UK economist Chris Harman wrote, [“it makes no sense to see the advanced countries as ‘parasitic’, living off the former colonial world”](#) (with few exceptions, this chauvinistic position is Trotskyist orthodoxy).

The first argument, for instance, is made by Tony Brewer in a well-known survey of Marxist theories of imperialism; by Giovanni Arrighi, a very well-known sociologist of the world-economy; and, by respected Marxist economist Ramaa Vasudevan.⁶⁴ The second argument is made by N.B. Turner, in an [attempt to demonstrate that China](#) is an imperialist country (we argue otherwise): the author argues that because China is a net exporter of capital, it is therefore imperialist.⁶⁵ The notable and otherwise useful introduction to Marx’s *Capital* by the well-known Marxologist Michael Heinrich combines arguments one and three in a fashion typical of those with “ultra-left”⁶⁶ politics: Lenin is supposed to have missed, according to Heinrich, the fact that “the greater portion of [advanced countries’] capital export went not to colonies and dependent territories but to other developed capitalist countries” and the fact that, for the world’s greatest imperialist power, the US, “the import of capital, rather than the export of capital, is the decisive factor” (whatever this means precisely).⁶⁷

To a certain extent, these critiques are based on facts, though the interpretation of these facts is badly mistaken. The “truest” fact is that the US is indeed literally a net importer of capital in one sense, in that the rest of the world regularly invests more, in dollar amounts, than the US does in the rest of the world. BoP accounting is somewhat confusing, so we here lay out what this means. By definition, a country which is a net importer of goods (i.e., runs a trade deficit), such as the US, also *must* have (again, by definition) a capital surplus: more money flows into that country *as capital* than flows out *as capital*. This is fairly logical when one reflects on the narrow and limited meaning of a trade deficit, which means simply that a country is buying more physical goods and services from abroad than it is selling abroad (or to foreign nationals here on vacation). If this is true—if the US is buying more goods and services *from* abroad than it *sends* abroad—it must somehow be financing this gap between imports and exports. Since it’s not being financed entirely by the US export of goods abroad (which is true by assumption here), it must be financed by a net *inflow* of capital: the US is

⁶⁴ Anthony Brewer, *Marxist Theories of Imperialism — A Critical Survey* (1981), p. 81. Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long 20th Century*, second edition (1994/2010), p. 15-16. Ramaa Vasudevan, [“Finance, Imperialism, and the Hegemony of the Dollar”](#) (2008).

⁶⁵ Similar observations about the apparent flows of funds from poor to rich countries is sometimes referred to generally as the Lucas Paradox, especially by bourgeois economists.

⁶⁶ Ultra-left here means an aversion to the idea that socialism must be built rather than erected hastily overnight and a related indifference towards important bourgeois-democratic reforms on the way to socialism. Though these positions often appear to be “as left as possible”, [Lenin](#), [Marx](#), and [Engels](#) all noted that such politics often overlapped with centrist-liberal politics, precisely because the *impracticality* of ultraleft politics means that those holding such beliefs often fail to study strategy seriously (“it’s all capitalism to me, so why should I care if we win this union contract?”) and thus make basic tactical and strategic errors when they are finally forced into action. The authors of this article noticed this in the run-up to the 2016 elections, when many supposed “anarchists” actively defended the primary campaign of Hillary Clinton for reasons of “being practical”, even though such people typically scoff when communists invoke the same need for practicality.

⁶⁷ Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Marx’s Capital* (2004/2012), p. 215-216.

selling more US corporate and state debt, shares of stock in US firms, and new US-based plants to foreigners than it is spending on foreign corporate and state debt etc. (if this *weren't* true, then the US literally would not have the money to run a trade deficit).⁶⁸

It is correspondingly true that some developing countries such as China typically, but not always, have a net capital deficit and a trade surplus (although China did recently [record](#) a trade deficit, all of the huffing and puffing about China's trade surplus to the contrary). But, this tells us nothing about the kind of capital exported from China—its destination, the kind of asset it is invested in, and the rate of return on that asset.

Finally, it is superficially true that a good deal of FDI flows between the advanced countries, although this is misleading and addressed directly below.

The problem with these arguments can now be addressed quickly and more directly in list form.

1. First, Lenin does not argue that countries must be *net* exporters of capital in order to “truly” be exporters of capital, only that they must export capital in considerable measure. So, here, all three arguments listed above are brought into question.
2. At any rate, Lenin noticed and commented on the fact that a great deal of capital export from the imperialist countries flows to other imperialist countries, so to simply point this out as if Lenin had not noticed it is not much of an argument.⁶⁹
3. Many forms of “capital exports” made by developing countries are actually hardly or even made at a loss and consist in the purchase of reserve assets (especially imperialist states' debt) by their central banks. N.B. Turner's book, referenced above, actually does us the favor of demonstrating this for China (see *op. cit.*, p. 49): in 2012, 65 percent of China's capital outflow was invested in reserve assets (primarily, low-yield US state debt which is also paid in dollars the US can print at will for almost no cost); the next biggest category was “other” (which seems to include other forms of “non-capitalist” investment). Only 15 percent of China's foreign capital outflow was portfolio or FD investment, and the raw sum of that investment was less than 30 percent of the corresponding sum—FDI and portfolio investment—coming into China (even though the rest of the world-economy is much larger than the economy of China). So, it is really a significant statistical error to talk about China as a net exporter of super-profitable capital (arguments two and three are significantly weakened).
4. The capital exported to such countries by the imperialist powers, by contrast, is super-profitable for the imperialist countries sending it (the crucial issue for Lenin's theory, in our opinion, is in fact that large differential in the rate of profit). This is

⁶⁸ Adding to the general confusion around BoP accounting, the term “capital account” is what is *generally* used for the concept “balance of capital inflows and outflows for a given country”—that is the primary name under which the English-language Wikipedia [article](#) exists, e.g.—but the Bureau of Economic Analysis refers to this concept by “financial account” *and also* uses “capital account” for an insignificant BoP category which often has no activity.

⁶⁹ See the table in Chapter IV of *Imperialism*.

discussed on p. 10 above, where several useful citations are also located (this further weakens arguments two and three above).

5. A great deal of FDI received by advanced countries consists in mergers and acquisitions rather than true investment, among other serious limitations involved in the incautious use of FDI statistics⁷⁰ (this weakens argument three).

We end by summarizing our different view of these these apparently-damaging facts in light of Lenin's theory, which are actually completely consistent with his analysis of imperialism as the decay and parasitism of the advanced capitalist countries which necessarily gives way either to the rise of developing capitalist countries or socialist revolution. The large net inflows of capital into the US are often significantly comprised of the purchase of US debt securities, especially US state debt.⁷¹ Even though the United States' net international position is significantly [negative](#), its primary income balance abroad (income derived from foreign investment) is regularly [positive](#), meaning that the United States must earn substantially more on its investments abroad than "foreigners" do by investing in the US. This makes sense: since the dollar is the world reserve currency (and thus in constant demand) and since the US may issue as many dollars or as much dollar-denominated debt as it likes, the United States can flood the market for those assets without substantially cheapening them, leading to situations (as in the ten years of sluggishness after the GFC) in which, perversely, developing countries' central banks were receiving [negative interest rates](#) to hold US debt: thus, they not only sent *real* goods and services to the US for debt which they may well never cash in, but they also actually paid the US for the privilege of holding its debt. This is essentially consistent with Lenin's description of a parasitic, decaying capitalism.

J. Seratsky *et al.*, 24 July 2018 [revised 1 Aug 2018]

⁷⁰ See this short, effective article by John Smith ([automatic PDF download](#)), p. 13 *ff.* Smith's *Imperialism in the 21st Century* (2016) is highly [recommended](#).

⁷¹ *Financial Accounts of the United States*, Z.1, [First Quarter 2018](#), table F.133. This point is emphasized by the honest bourgeois economists Henry C.K. Liu (in various places, especially [here](#)) and Richard Duncan, in *The Dollar Crisis* (second edition, 2005), Part One.