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War drive

Militarism and imperialism in the 21st century

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The relationship between militarism, war and capitalism has a new relevance at the beginning of the 21st century. This 'war without limits', the new political programme adopted by the Bush Administration, marks a significant change of in the militarism of US capitalism, and more than ever, the globalisation of capital and militarism appear as two aspects of imperialist domination.

Militarism, capital and technology

Rosa Luxemburg noted that "militarism has a specific function in the history of capital. It accompanies every historic phase of accumulation". [1] Her analyses bring out what one might nowadays call the 'historicity' of the relationship of militarism to capital and they retain their pertinence today. She defines "the imperialist phase of accumulation [as] phase of the global competition of capital [which] has the entire world as theatre. Here the methods employed are colonial policy, the system of international borrowing, the policy of spheres of interest, war. Violence, cheating, pillage are openly employed, without any mask". This is contrary to the "bourgeois liberal theory [which] separates the economic domain of capital from the other aspect, that of the blows of force, considered as more or less fortuitous, of foreign policy".

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The opposition: Ann Arbor

Luxemburg stressed in a very contemporary manner that "political violence is also the instrument and vehicle of the economic process; the duality of the aspects of accumulation conceals the same organic phenomenon, originating in the conditions of capitalist reproduction" [stress by this author]

In his polemic against Dühring, Engels analyses the relationship between militarism and the technological development of capitalism. History shows that the conduct of wars rests on the production of weapons, which itself depends on the state of the economy, more precisely on industrial and technological development, because "industry remains industry, whether it is applied to the production or the destruction of things". [2] Engels notes the radical changes that took place after capitalism came to dominate the world. "The modern warship is not only a product, but at the same time a specimen of modern large-scale industry, a floating factory", For him, "militarism dominates and is swallowing Europe" and this formula would find a tragic confirmation in the war that broke out between the European imperialisms in 1914.

Weapons production is not only 'a specimen of modern large-scale industry'; since the Second World War, it has been at the heart of technological trajectories essential to the mode of production (aeronautics and space, electronics, the nuclear industry). The military expenditure of the United States, but also that of the other imperialist countries, reached extraordinarily high levels in the subsequent five decades, supposedly to meet the threat represented by the USSR. In the latter country, the gigantic sums devoted to defence consolidated the ruling caste and its parasitic existence, while also contributing to the bleeding of productive and financial resources.

The outstanding fact since the Second World War is a deep implantation of the military-industrial system in the economy and society of the US, which has in no way been weakened by the disappearance of the USSR; on the contrary it is now entering a new stage of consolidation. This strengthening of the military-industrial system rests on a conjuncture of factors: an industrial concentration and an ever closer liaison of the weapons companies with financial capital, an increase in the military budget embarked on by Clinton in 1999 and considerably amplified by Bush, and a

strengthened presence in information and communication technologies (ICT). These technologies benefited from Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative ('star wars') and play a determinant role in 'information domination' and 'network centric warfare' [3] which were the favoured themes of Pentagon strategists in the 1990s.

Military supremacy has allowed US weapons companies to conquer a central position in the development of ICT, dominated in the 1990s by the civil companies (the so-called 'new economy' and its associated start-ups).

The weapons companies must also develop new weapons systems for ground forces. The preparation of 'urban wars' (the expression employed by the Pentagon experts) waged by soldiers equipped armed with hyper-sophisticated weapons, occupies an important place in the military budgets. The aim is to wage war against the populations of the immense agglomerations in the countries of the South (those of South America obsess US strategists), and eventually against the 'dangerous classes' of the cities of the North. One can then envisage that the major influence the weapons groups have acquired inside the federal and state institutions since the second world war, together with the broadening of the 'national security agenda' to non-military objectives [4] which increasingly concern aspects of social and private life, will accelerate the formation of a 'military-security system'. This latter will, in the coming years, play a much more important role than that of the 'military-industrial complex' during the Cold War.

The formation of this military-security system gives the US state a considerable power.

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We are far from the decline of the 'state form' of the domination of capital, which, according to Hardt and Negri, would give way to an 'Empire' inside of which capital and labour would confront each other without mediation. [5] To maintain its domination, capital cannot do without a political apparatus, institutions (judiciary, military and so on) which have been constituted, strengthened and streamlined for two centuries in the framework of the states of the dominant capitalist countries. 'world capitalism', in the sense spoken of by these authors, does not exist. Capital, as a social relationship, certainly has a propensity to transcend national frontiers and other barriers (forms of socio-political organization for example). The 'world market is contained in the very notion of capital' as Marx said, but it is a process marked by contradictions which are expressed in inter-capitalist and inter-imperialist rivalries as well as in crises. That is why the global extension of capital has always taken and will continue to take on a physiognomy inextricably linked to the inter-state relationship of forces and its associated violence.

The domination of the US over the other imperialist countries is obvious. That is one reason why the breakout of inter-imperialist wars like those that took place in the 20th century is improbable. The integration of transatlantic capital, between the US and a part of the European Union, continues, and has constituted one of the distinctive features of 'globalization' in the late 20th century. The dominant classes of the US and the EU are, to a certain extent, in the situation that Marx described in relation to the competition between capitalists: "while there is little love lost between them in competition among themselves", they "form a veritable freemason society vis-À-vis the whole working-class" and, need we add, vis-À-vis the peoples of the countries subjected to their domination. [6]

Globalization of capital and militarism

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The opposition: Los Angeles

The improbability of wars between the dominant capitalist powers does not render obsolete the relation between war and imperialism established by Marxism at the beginning of the 20th century. It is enough to think of what would happen if the capitalist transformation of China under the control of the bureaucracy of the Chinese CP came to threaten the US on the economic terrain. [7] The ultra-imperialism that would allow capital to overcome its contradictions, as imagined by Kautsky, is surely not on the agenda. War maintains and expands its role in the current phase of the globalization of capital.

The globalization of capital does not involve an expansion of capitalism defined as an enlargement of the reproduction of value on a planetary scale. It leads rather to a growth of predatory operations on the part of capital, whose 'property rights' (over financial assets) allow it to collect financial incomes as well as to appropriate the processes of life itself. "There are not too many necessities of life produced, in proportion to the existing population. Quite the reverse. Too little is produced to decently and humanely satisfy the wants of the great mass." [8]

It is this contradiction that the globalization of capital has carried to an unequalled level, crushing most of the countries of Africa and, in the course of the 1990s, plunging the 'emergent countries' of Asia and Latin America into crisis. The state has always played a major role in this process of expropriation of the producers by capital, not only in the so-called phase of 'primitive accumulation' but also during the colonial conquests whose objective was to submit the peoples and territories of the planet to the domination of capital.

The violence of the state is more than ever necessary today, in polar opposition to the mystifications that associate the 'markets' and free trade with peace and democracy. The globalization of capital is accompanied by a process of commodification that could be defined as the extension of the area where capital can exercise its property rights. Such is indeed the prior condition to the existence of 'markets', whose objective and effect are, on the one hand, to increase the dependence of the producers while rendering them more 'free', that is more constrained to work for capital, and on the other hand, to enslave new social groups, in particular in the dominated countries. These areas are not only geographical territories, but also new areas of private appropriation, like the biosphere (permits for the right to pollute), the life process (patents on seeds and so on) and increasingly rights of intellectual property whose incessant extension represents a serious threat to human liberty. All these objectives cannot be attained without the use of violence.

The US is at the centre of the globalization of capital. The strengthening of militarism observed in the 1990s is not an additional extra tacked on to an otherwise healthy economic functioning. The globalization of capital and militarism are two aspects of the "same organic phenomenon" as Rosa Luxemburg put it, and it is in the US that they are at their most interdependent. Political-military power was a determinant in the process that allowed the US to attract influxes of money capital seeking high 'security' in the 1990s, with an accelerated tempo after the Asian economic crisis of 1997.

Finally, the US economy was hit by recession in 2000. [9] It is not possible to analyze here the mechanisms, but the important thing to understand is that if the US is at the heart of the globalization of capital, it is also at the heart of its contradictions, much deeper than can be measured by the indicators used to characterize a recession. The rapid development of these contradictions has given the lie to those who thought that the US constituted an 'island of prosperity' in the ocean of global devastation produced by the domination of financial capital (the 'new economy'). The economic contradictions have been amplified and not reduced by the implementation of the budget programmes decided on after September 11, 2001, for which the term 'class war' has been used. [10]

In this context, the 'war without limits' the Bush Administration has committed itself to is in relation with the trajectory of capitalism over the past 20 years. This policy expresses the interests of a financial oligarchy, whose material bases rest on the pillage of natural resources (with oil, of course, in the first rank) and on the endless payment of the debt, even if endangers and threatens the very existence of the most vulnerable social classes and peoples. The

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control that the US and the other dominant countries of the 'international community' are in the process of exerting through forms of direct management, mandate or protectorate has, still less than the colonial conquests of imperialism at the beginning of the 20th century, the pretension and the possibility of stimulating the economic development of the dominated countries. As shown by the tragic example of the African continent over the last 20 years, what is on the agenda now is the dismembering of the states of the 'South', which cannot resist the consequences of imperialist domination.

The social classes whose existence rests on a mode of social domination which privileges to this point the appropriation of the value created by the producers and encourages still more predation, can only have very short term concerns, without regard for the catastrophic social and environmental consequences for humanity. They need governments and state institutions that assure them the full enjoyment and security of their property rights. The more financial capital succeeds in extending its logic, the more the need for armed force grows.

[1] Rosa Luxemburg, 'The Accumulation of Capital', Book 2, Chapter 32 'Militarism, Field of Action for Capital'.

[2] Friedrich Engels, 'Anti-Dühring', Part II: Political Economy, III. Theory of Force

[3] Military superiority now rests on the efficiency of communications, the power of informatic tools, the precision of weapons guidance and so on.

[4] The enlargement of the notion of 'national security' to the defence of 'globalization' was already present under Clinton and it has been developed by the Bush Administration.

[5] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, 'Empire' (Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2000)

[6] See my contribution "Une bourgeoisie mondiale pour un capital financier mondialisé?" in Séminaire d'Etudes Marxistes, 'La bourgeoisie : classe dirigeante d'un nouveau capitalisme', Syllepse, 2001

[7] A significant part of US military programmes (including the anti-missiles defence system) are directly focused against China

[8] K. Marx, 'Capital', Volume 3, Part 3, Chapter 15, 'Exposition of the Internal Contradictions of the Law'.

[9] According to the figures of the Bureau of Economic Analysis, the rate of profitability of the capital of companies began to fall in 1997.

[10] The title of the dossier in Business Week (January 20, 2003) on Bush's proposed tax-cutting programme.