



I confess that I cringe when I see the word “post-modern.” This word has obscured more discussions, confused more gullible readers, and conned more writers than any word since “existential” and its “-ism.” For the most part, it has served as a kind of fashionable linguistic operator that signals something radical and profound will follow. Almost always, what follows disappoints.

Eric Walberg’s book, [*Postmodern Imperialism*](#) (Clarity Press, 2011), doesn’t change my general opinion of the word, though what follows the title certainly doesn’t disappoint.

Walberg has offered a welcome taxonomy of imperialism from its nineteenth century genesis until today; he has given a plausible explanation of imperialism’s contours since the exit of the Soviet Union and Eastern European socialism from the world stage; and he has convincingly described Israel’s unique role in the continuing reshaping of imperialism’s grasp for world domination.

One of the disappointments of recent Marxist thought is a neglect of the theory of imperialism. It is not that imperialism is questioned by Marxists; it would be hard to find an advocate who denied its existence or historical significance. Indeed, few Marxists dispute (since the Lenin-Kautsky debate) the fundamental elements of imperialism as outlined by Lenin and presaged by Hobson; but its historical trajectory -- deflected by wars (hot and cold), shifting balances of forces and alliances, and economic upheaval – has received only cursory attention. All acknowledge that the dominant imperial center of power has shifted from Britain before World War I to the USA after the Second World War. Outside of the bizarre pseudo-Marxism popularized in the post-Soviet period (Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* and theories of the decline of the nation-state and ascendancy of the trans-national corporation, for example), most left-of-center political thinkers would concede that imperialism – especially, as expressed by US imperialism -- is alive and well today. Yet, Marxist studies have yet to provide a full, overarching account of the material forces that have shaped imperialism’s evolution over the last century and a half. We see this failing in the world-wide confusion and tepid resistance to NATO’s Balkan aggressions, the various contrived color “revolutions,” and

the wars and interventions in the Middle East and Central Asia.

It is to Walberg's credit that he attempts to provide this account. While expressing respectful homage to the Leninist tradition, Walberg writes in an eclectic style that expropriates the terms of the agents of imperialism, both old and new. Following Lord Curzon in 1898 and Z. Brzezinski today, imperialism becomes the Great Game, an exercise in aggressive national self-interest that engages economic coercion, political manipulation, subversion, alliances, and, of course, war. And behind the curtain of "national self-interest" proclaimed by the ideologues of imperialism lies the real interests of monopoly and finance capital.

In Walberg's account of the classic era of imperialism – dubbed Great Game I (GGI) – European powers and the US competed for the economic and political domination of the world, its resources, and its people. In this competition, the British Empire stood triumphant. This small island, thanks to its industrial might, its dominant navy, and its highly developed colonial apparatus, imposed its will globally. Other powers sought to undermine this dominance, resulting in the tensions and conflicts that climaxed in the Great War, World War I.

The Great War, in turn, spawned an anti-imperialist movement centered in revolutionary Russia, nascent Communist Parties, and nationalist movements aroused and supported by the liberated Euro-Asian power, the USSR. For Walberg, this event – the Bolshevik revolution—became the central event determining the course of imperialism. The crisis of imperialism identified with the unprecedented slaughter of 1914-1918 unleashed a new era of counter-revolution – or counter-anti-imperialism – with the locus of anti-imperialism to be found in the USSR.

Walberg calls this new era "GGII: Empire Against Communism".

It is this assessment, this correct analysis, which separates him from the conventional view popularized on the left, center and right. Walberg is emphatically correct on two crucial counts.

First, he identifies the imperialist project as targeting the role of the Soviet Union in inspiring, supporting and sustaining the anti-imperialist movement after World War I. Those honest enough to recognize the decline of the anti-imperialist movement since the demise of the Soviet Union surely must recognize this point. From China's liberation to the independence of the former African Portuguese colonies, from Egypt's national movement to the Vietnamese victory over US aggression, from Cuba's revolution to the destruction of apartheid in South Africa, the Soviet Union had devoted generous material and moral support to anti-imperialism. Because of this support, anti-Communism became the ideological, political and military pillar of imperialism.

Second, he discounts the view advanced by imperialists and the ultra-left that the Soviet Union was itself an imperialist power. While he voices criticisms of the USSR, he stops far short of characterizing its policies as imperialistic, a conclusion that he argues persuasively.

Between the two World Wars, the imperialist countries were saddled with a profound economic crisis that challenged the very viability of capitalism and strengthened the

anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist movements. In many countries, this challenge generated a ferocious and violent movement, fascism, expressing a new, more virulent, and aggressive strain of anti-Communism. Both in Europe and Asia, the primary goal of these movements, when securing power, was to remove the obstacle of Communism and anti-imperial nationalism in furthering their imperialist goals. In all cases, the Communists and anti-imperial nationalists were the backbone of domestic resistance to these aggressions.

After the Second World War and the defeat of fascism, the US engaged its economic and military might to lead the imperialist powers. At the same time, it organized and launched a new, more sophisticated attack on the strengthened, world-wide Communist and anti-imperialist movement. The lengthy Cold War, while proclaimed as a struggle between democracy and tyranny, was simply a continuance of imperialism in a new context. At stake was the economic exploitation of the resources and people of the world outside of the imperial club.

Walberg does a thorough job of demonstrating the role of the US dollar nexus in cementing the anti-Communist alliance, as well as describing the international institutions enabling and enforcing this dollar domination of world economic activity. He equally exposes the political and military institutions and alliances, such as NATO, created to both maintain US imperial goals and confront Communism and anti-imperialism.

Walberg's narrative masterfully exposes the imaginative, but unscrupulous tactics devised to further the imperial goals. From engineered coups to CIA-backed intellectuals, from surrogate insurgents to phony human rights campaigns, Walberg dissects the tactics and reveals the hypocrisy behind imperialist intrigues. Most impressively, Walberg knits together the long standing, but seldom acknowledged, imperialist tactic of exploiting purist Islamic movements -- with its latent hostility to secular leftism and nationalism -- to oppose, divert, and even exterminate socialist and anti-imperialist movements in the Middle East and Asia. Of course this is not a new tactic; imperialism similarly used Christianity, especially Catholicism, to disable trade union movements and left parties in Europe and the US. But, Walberg brings much detail and historical continuity to the story of religious manipulation in the Islamic world. And he reveals Israel as a key player in this maneuver.

With the departure of the Soviet Union, a new phase of imperialism emerged, dubbed "Great Game III" by Walberg. The consequent triumphalism of the US and other imperialist powers was disguised as the promise of a global paradise based on economic fundamentalism, free trade, "democratic" governance and human rights. But in truth, this disguise masked a commitment to economic aggression, imperial intervention, and unfettered domination. A massive array of new or transformed institutions – the UN, NAFTA, countless NGOs, etc—eagerly aided the imperial program. And after September 11, 2001, imperialism found its alien scapegoat in Islam, the excuse to vigorously and openly mount military adventures, especially in Asia, the Middle East and Northern Africa.

To Walberg's praise, his deep understanding of the shifting currents of imperial aggression along with its historical continuities allows him to identify the anti-imperialist actors in each phase of imperialism's development. He clearly understands that resistance to imperialism,

regardless of its religious, ideological or political underpinnings, is objectively anti-imperialist. This is in sharp contrast to many on the left in Europe and the US who sided with imperialism or demonized the Islamic fighters who met the US on the battlefield. Blinded by their cultural distaste for what they saw as obscurantism, social backwardness, and intolerance, they betray anti-imperialist unity and objectively take the side of imperialism. Like previous supporters, seduced by Britain's "civilizing mission," they accede to apologists who portray the resistance as "Islamofascists." This shallow understanding of imperialism accounts for the failure of many to recognize and reject the recent Libyan regime change and the current foreign interventions in Syria and Iran as imperialist actions. Leftist "purists" prefer standing on the sidelines to siding with the "tainted" Islamists who now militantly oppose imperial power.

Walberg places much emphasis on Israel's role in the imperial project. His position as a Middle East-based writer for Cairo's Al Ahram newspaper, coupled with his obvious prodigious research, gives him a privileged vantage point for commenting on this area. Readers will be impressed with his account of the history and ideology of Zionism. He brings great detail to the overt and covert activities of Israel both on behalf of US interests (as a policeman in the region) and in its own behalf (as a neo-colonial aggressor). His exposure of the role of US Zionists and their political partners in shaping US policies towards Israel (and the Middle East) is boldly and starkly presented, with little of the usual forbearance or timidity.

On the other hand, I believe his privileged position also brings a measure of myopia to his analysis. Throughout the book, he asserts a persistent importance of the Middle East and Central Asia that might unwittingly minimize the importance of other regions in imperialism's grand designs. Certainly his demonstrated sensitivity to the shifting forces, policies and foci of imperialism would suggest that there is not one materially critical area of imperialist design. For example, through the first thirty years of the postwar period, imperialism was mostly directed to the Far East, with massive, brutal wars launched in Korea and Vietnam. And today, the staunch anti-imperialist advances in Central and South America cause deep concern and intense activity in the imperialist centers, especially the US. This area gets little coverage in Walberg's fine book. Imperialism is indeed a scheme for complete global domination, wherever there are resources and people to exploit.

Also, I think that Walberg overstates the role of Israel in the imperialist order. Despite his excellent exposition of the "tail wagging the dog" behavior of Israel, it remains a junior partner in the imperialist picture. Israel still needs and expects the US to pull its chestnuts out of the fire.

In the same vein, it is an exaggeration to portray Islam (or any other religion) as inherently anti-imperialist: in his words, "The unyielding anti-imperialist nature of Islam, its rejection of the fundamental principles of capitalism concerning money, its refusal to be sidelined from economic and hence political life..." Surely, Walberg's own account challenges this claim; Islamic movements in the Middle East have and continue to shift sides frequently in both the struggles between imperial powers, in support of imperialist powers, and its current leading role in resisting imperialism in the Middle East. I would suggest, rather, that religion adjusts (as with Catholic Liberation Theology) to the material, historical plight of its believers. In the case of the Middle East, half a century of Palestinian oppression is the wellspring of contemporary

Islamic anti-imperialism.

"GGIII: Many Players, Many Games"—Walberg's final chapter – is an immensely useful overview of how things stand at the moment in the Middle East-Central Asia "Great Game." One will not find a better concise account of the forces, alliances and institutions at play in this contest, a contest best understood as between imperialism and its foes.

One final quibble: throughout Post-Modern Imperialism, Walberg insists on the division between pre-modern, modern, and post-modern states (hence, the title), a distinction he adopts from the influential work of Robert Cooper. Distinctions are neither true nor false; rather they are helpful, misleading or irrelevant. Despite its currency, Cooper's distinction blurs instead of clarifying Walberg's excellent account of imperialism.

That said, I can enthusiastically recommend Post-Modern Imperialism – the book is a serious contribution to our critical understanding of imperialism, its history, and, particularly, its expression in our era. By reading this study, both Marxist and non-Marxist activists will be better armed to confront the beast.

reviewed by Zoltan Zigedy

<http://zsz-blg.blogspot.com/2012/01/review-post-modern-imperialismgeopoliti.html>