



The New Imperialism

David Harvey

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People around the world are confused and concerned. Is it a sign of strength or of weakness that the US has suddenly shifted from a politics of consensus to one of coercion on the world stage? What was really at stake in the war on Iraq? Was it all about oil and, if not, what else was involved? What role has a sagging economy played in pushing the US into foreign adventurism? What exactly is the relationship between US militarism abroad and domestic politics? These are the questions taken up in this compelling and original book. In this closely argued and clearly written book, David Harvey, one of the leading social theorists of his generation, builds a conceptual framework to expose the underlying forces at work behind these momentous shifts in US policies and politics. The compulsions behind the projection of US power on the world as a "new imperialism" are here, for the first time, laid bare for all to see.

The New Imperialism Details

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From Reader Review The New Imperialism for online ebook

Billie Pritchett says

The upshot of David Harvey's *The New Imperialism* is that the new period in which we find ourselves in the world is not about territorial control, as in the days, for example, when the British Empire controlled so much of the world. Rather, the new imperialism is about economic control, particular control of resources. The occasion for which Harvey wrote the book was the run-up to the Iraqi War, at a time when it was not certain that the war was going to take place. In the book, Harvey argues that the main purpose that the Bush II administration wanted to attack Iraq was to have both new friends in the Middle East and to control the oil supply in Iraq. Many readers suspicious of an "all-about-oil" thesis might object that this could not have been one of the primary motivations for attacking Iraq, because after the United States military got in there and protected the oil fields, they almost immediately turned them over to the newly established Iraqi government. But this might be to miss Harvey's point. Harvey's point is not that the United States government would like *ownership* over the oil supplies but that the government would like *control* over the oil supplies. And one way to maintain that control is to control the economic rewards and amount of military protection that the Iraqi government can receive, putting pressure on Iraq to keep oil deals and supplies in the U.S. government's favor. Nobody can see into the hearts of men, but Harvey makes a convincing case that this was at least a primary motivation.

Steve Rolf says

Harvey's text stands up remarkably well 15 years on from its publication. He claims to have produced it in around a month, during the leadup to the Iraq war which began in March 2003, which is an impressive achievement. It was once described to me as an 'airport read' by a lecturer, and though this is an overstatement, it is relatively more lightweight than the texts which made Harvey's name as a leading Marxist political economist (namely 'Limits to Capital' and 'The Condition of Postmodernity'). Perhaps the speed of production eliminated the possibility of detailed examination of the work of rival theoreticians which is at one point the most frustrating aspect of the work and contributes substantially, I think, to its popularity and readability.

The argument running through the text is one now well-referenced in the extensive contemporary literature on materialist geopolitics — that of defining modern imperialism as the outcome of a complex relationship between 'capitalist' and 'territorial' logics. While the capitalist logic represents 'molecular processes of accumulation', the territorial logic operates at a grander spatio-temporal scale of world politics whereby state managers seek to uphold their powers. These are occasionally conflated with 'economic' and 'political' logics by Harvey's critics (and supporters), but rereading this text demonstrates to me that this is not Harvey's intention. On the contrary, Harvey is careful not to ascribe a territorial logic merely to states, pointing out that (certain) capitalists frequently hold interest in developing particular territories (or 'structured coherences' of capital accumulation) over the medium to long term (he writes that 'Imperialistic practices, from the perspective of capitalistic logic, are typically about exploiting the uneven geographical conditions under which capital accumulation occurs and also taking advantage of what I call the 'asymmetries' that inevitably arise out of spatial exchange relation'); while states never escape the imperative successfully to accumulate and appropriate capital and thus regularly intervene to smooth and improve its conditions (not to mention making substantial investments themselves, usually in the 'secondary and tertiary circuits of capital' — social expenditures and the built environment). There is, however, a broad distinction

between the modes of operation of these two logics and the sets of economic and political actors which *tend* to embody them, which is readily distinguishable by the focus on profit motives of the capitalist logic and the longer-term, mediated character of state expenditures (which need not be themselves directly profitable if they enhance capitalist accumulation).

All this is used to present an incredibly convincing explanation of the Iraq war based upon an account of the US' non-territorial imperialism. This sought to leverage control over Middle Eastern oil over decades prior to 2003, *the* crucial input into the US economy, through complex geopolitical engagements and a regional military buildup substantially independent from the direct control of oil interests in the US. I will not focus any further other than to say the detail of this account is one of the most impressive parts of the work and to my mind places Harvey firmly in the 'realist'-inspired camp of Marxist geopolitics.

From this, Harvey goes on to develop what again I think is a highly convincing account of the Wall Street-Treasury-IMF complex. Theoretically his accounting for this institutional formation in the drawing on Brenner and Gowan is convincing, but this section is empirically thin and doesn't add much historical detail in support of his argument. A positive aspect of this section is that while Harvey acknowledges the power and success of this complex in pursuing what he terms 'enforced devaluations' in Latin America, Russia and East Asia in the 1980s and 1990s whereby US banks raided these economies following debt crises, he equally emphasises the serious risks inherent in the neoconservative strategy of reasserting US economic dominance through military means in the Middle East — risks which most would now accept did indeed transpire with the quagmire of the Iraq war. Neoconservatives envisaged cowing rising rivals by successfully removing Saddam before moving on to challenge Iran, Syria and North Korea (and perhaps ultimately Russia). Instead, these three latter powers remain resurgent (with the partial exception of Syria's still pressurised Assad regime) and bolstered by increasingly close ties with China, with the potential to cohere into a serious geopolitical rival bloc to the US over the coming decade.

There is little to add on Harvey's other crucial concept elaborated in chapter 4, accumulation by dispossession (ABD), beyond the criticisms levelled by many other writers. Some of this I believe is unjust. Harman (2010) insists that Harvey views the state as 'separate' from capital and thus ripe for privatisation as a form of ABD, a charge I think is unfair given Harvey's embedding of the territorial logic of capital in its capitalist logic. Harvey also insists on the predominance of 'expanded reproduction' (or 'relative surplus value' vis-a-vis absolute surplus value) and thus the common charge that ABD cannot stand-in for capitalist accumulation through productivity enhancing investment is not one that Harvey would dispute, in my view. Instead, he links profitability crises in the advanced economies (drawing on Brenner) to the intensifying drive to cheat and steal in order to maintain growth, a temporarily-delimited possibility when enabled by the credit system and fictitious capital circulation.

In sum, this book is not quite readable enough to be a popular classic, and not quite precise enough in its positioning with regard to other theories of imperialism to satisfy the reader with substantial knowledge of the field (something characteristic of Harvey's late work). But for its creative deployment of theory construction to important empirical events, it repays reading today — and its many predictions (particularly of a resurgent populism drawing on nationalism to shield against neoliberal pressures) are surprisingly accurate. His proposal of a stable and 'benevolent' US-EU ultra-imperialism characterised by social democratic politics rather than aggressive militarist expansion as a first step with breaking with empire may chafe with radical readers for obvious reasons, but the current best hope for the left in the UK and the US (a Sanders-Corbyn alliance) might well have to contend with such a situation and it at least bears thinking through what such a shift in government would mean for the potential for ending imperialism altogether.

Kyle says

Probably worth reading just for the section on accumulation by dispossession. It's clearly resonated with a lot of authors, and part of the resurgence (and theoretical inspiration) for theoretical work on primitive accumulation. Also useful for the discussions on overaccumulation, economic crises (some prescient stuff here about austerity, privatization, overaccumulation and economic crisis) and how these relate to and problematize the relation/dialectic between territorial and capitalist logics of power, and how power seeks to resolve these contradictions arising from overaccumulation through spatio-temporal fixes. Discussion on monopoly, capitalism, and IP protection also very useful.

So a lot of good stuff.

However, as a book that came out in 2003 trying to make sense of the Iraq War, certain things are extrapolated from that time that make the book seem dated in retrospect. It's clear now that the EU was no real challenge to American hegemony, and that its success in capitalist terms was far overrated. Additionally, Harvey's positions on how Japanese and EU manufacturing relate to American manufacturing, and finance's relations to industry seem far less thought through than those of Gindin and Panitch in "The Making of Global Capitalism," a book that covers many similar themes (though I'd say it's worth reading both, they definitely have good insights in separate areas and some different theoretical approaches in places). Finally, Harvey's modernism will set the teeth grinding of anyone invested in anti-colonial practice and theory. While he's right to acknowledge that not all anti-primitive accumulation (accumulation by dispossession) struggle is progressive or liberatory, and that at times can be downright reactionary, and while he acknowledges many of the failures of the workerist left and trade unionist socialism in ignoring these sorts of community/social struggles, his insistence that there is a progressive aspect to capitalist/state primitive accumulation that should be encouraged because it tears apart old hierarchies is frustratingly a stagist and doctrinaire Marxist view of history and colonialism. However, this doesn't ruin the theoretical work on accumulation by dispossession, as I think this ending to the chapter he provides is simply one way to view the chapter and the work, and it's clear that many other scholars have taken this in a different direction, avoiding the stagist view and focusing further on anti-colonial and anti-patriarchal struggle against capitalism.

Mehdi809 says

Generally , it is a good book but some where you will be confused,
for example I do not understand why Liberalism and Capitalism allow to capital to help to empower some country such as China while the investor knows they faced to problem.
How is it possible New Liberalism to let other power emerge to make problem for them in future.

Kristin says

An interesting discussion of US imperialism in the 21st century. Written in 2004, Harvey's book anticipates the housing bubble, the financial collapse, the rise of China as an economic power (including warnings about US indebtedness to China), and the chaos that is the Iraq situation. A smart book, although the economic language in the middle was a little much for a nonspecialist. But for the most part this book is accessible and engaging.

Perez Malone says

This book isn't too difficult to get through but it does require a little more thought than most books. It is especially interesting to read it now with all the fears of recession and oil at such a high price. It's funny to remember that just a few years ago people were screaming about oil being \$40 a barrel. If only! His analysis of the US economic situation seems especially astute given the recent fallout of the housing market. Free-market diehards probably won't be persuaded by his arguments and critiques, but people who are more receptive to his ideas will find a new lens through which to view the world around them. This book has given me the push I needed to finally decide to read his earlier book, *The Limits to Capital*.

Foppe says

As I've read *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom* before I read this book, this book reads more like a progress report than a standalone work, and it should probably be read in conjunction with *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* and *Cosmopolitanism* (though I would recommend you read the other two books first). Contains a number of interesting insights, in any case.

Sajad Afshar says

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Steve Cucharo says

This book is probably best read alongside Harvey's "A Brief History of Neoliberalism." Both are great and touch upon the same topic in different ways. As you can imagine, Harvey is best when he's on familiar ground (capital accumulation, spatio-temporal fixes, dispossession...), but there may be better thinkers to approach when considering the distinct and complicated role of the state in IR. Nevertheless, you should go read it.

Joe Blankenship says

This book was eye-opening in several aspects. This is a must read for people, especially those in the US wondering what is happening around them and to them, needing answers to the obstacles we face today and those we'll face in the future.

Drew says

I've said it before, I think David Harvey is a genius. Maybe I base that conclusion on how many times he uses phrases that go way above my head. I can't really begin to summarize his argument, but its not quite as simplistic as the title might imply.

One key theme he spends a lot of time developing is capitalist imperialism as "accumulation through dispossession." An oversimplified definition is basically that industrialized countries continue to expand economically through dispossession of a satellite or debtor country(e.g. the US would accumulate through the dispossession of Iraqi oil). But Harvey explains it all much better, so read the book.

Interesting note: the book was written in 2003, but Harvey basically spells out the economic turmoil of the past six months since the housing crisis began. At the time it was speculation of what could happen, and now its happening.

Karlo Mikhail says

The book offers a concise and accessible overview of Harvey's thoughts on capitalist-imperialism. Especially liked the elaboration of his concept on "accumulation by dispossession". Some reference are a bit dated though with the Bush administration as its main point of departure. But many of the conclusions and implications explored by the book remain valid up to the present: the growing trend towards multi-polarity amid gradual weakening of US imperial power, rise of China, the Real Estate bubble crash, etc. Can't agree with his idea of a new "New Deal" as a way out of untangling the havoc created by decades of neoliberal triumphalism though.

Tim says

This book isn't too difficult to get through but it does require a little more thought than most books. It is especially interesting to read it now with all the fears of recession and oil at such a high price. It's funny to remember that just a few years ago people were screaming about oil being \$40 a barrel. If only! His analysis of the US economic situation seems especially astute given the recent fallout of the housing market. Free-market diehards probably won't be persuaded by his arguments and critiques, but people who are more receptive to his ideas will find a new lens through which to view the world around them.

This book has given me the push I needed to finally decide to read his earlier book, *The Limits to Capital*.

Joshua says

This book was written in the lead up to the 2003 Iraq war. It has a very prescient analysis that stands up well to the hindsight that the last 11 years affords. It is very useful for understanding how the G20 are attempting to restructure the global capitalist economy today. The G20's current strategy of long term infrastructure development is pointed to by David Harvey 11 years before the time. He explains how this is one method the

capitalist states can reactivate capital accumulation. I think this is a work of science that has explanatory power and can therefore help us as activists today.

Titus Hjelm says

Not as catchy as the neoliberalism book, but interesting analysis that combines current economic analysis with a solid Marxist framework. Harvey is no doubt the most interesting and least obscure Marxist out there.
