

“ANTHROPOLOGY AND IMPERIALISM” REVISITED

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An article by the author in the Economic and Political Weekly in the late 1960s noted that Western anthropologists had neglected the study of imperialism as a world system. The author suggests below that this has been remedied, as various social and political movements catalyzed a corpus of social science literature and debate. This article examines demographic and economic indicators to highlight the changing character of developed and less developed capitalist and socialist countries and its significance for social scientists.

In 1967 I wrote a paper “New Proposals for Anthropologists” for the Southwestern States Anthropological Association meeting in San Francisco. I couldn’t think of a journal in the United States that might be likely to publish it, and it was published in *Economic and Political Weekly. Monthly Review* republished it in 1968, as “Anthropology and Imperialism,” after which it was translated into several languages and reprinted many times.

I want first to briefly outline the problems that were bothering me when I wrote that paper and the historical background to it. I would then like to mention some of the kinds of work that have been done in North America since 1968 that are relevant to these problems. Finally, I want to talk about some of the major changes in the world which have an impact on our subject and our thinking.

“Anthropology and Imperialism” was written at the height of the war in Vietnam. My husband, David Aberle, and I, along with a number of other anthropologists, had become deeply disturbed by the evidence of wholesale destruction of territory, villages and people by U.S. forces in Vietnam, especially by the use of anti-personnel weapons such as napalm, and the defoliation of forests and cultivated land.

In 1967 David Aberle presented a resolution at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association which condemned those weapons. To

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our dismay, it was ruled out of order by the then chairperson, Frederica de Laguna, and vehemently opposed by Margaret Mead, who argued that political resolutions were "not in the professional interests of anthropologists." There was a commotion on the floor. David Aberle, Gerald Berreman and others argued against the chair, but the day was won when Michael Harner rose and stated: "Genocide is not in the professional interests of anthropologists." Against the chair's ruling, the resolution was then passed by a large majority. It was one of the first published statements by a professional association against the war in Vietnam. There was of course an enormous outcry against the war by the U.S. public as well as by professionals in later years. The Vietnam war (or as the Vietnamese more properly call it, the U.S. imperialist war) came to an end in 1975, after about two million Vietnamese had been killed and perhaps another two million crippled.

By "imperialism" I mean any social system in which the government and/or private property owners of one or more countries dominate the government and people of one or more other countries or regions politically, militarily, economically or socio-culturally (usually all four of those) to the detriment of most of the subordinated people's welfare.

For the last 400 years, most imperialism has been capitalist. During this century, capitalist imperialism has wreaked the most harm and been responsible for the most deaths through two world wars and almost countless "minor wars," as well as through starvation, malnutrition, destruction of traditional agriculture and industries and political repression by dependent, dictatorial governments.

However, the Soviet Union and China have also practised forms of imperialism since their revolutions. In 1967 I tended to neglect this phenomenon because I am a Marxist and was somewhat biased in my outlook, and partly because I did not have evidence that the U.S.S.R. and China had extracted economic surplus from their dependencies, and so I tended to underestimate the political and cultural repression that they had practised. I agree, however, with those who argue that the Soviet Union *has* practised imperialism in eastern Europe and in some of its own republics (although not, I would add, in allied Third World countries such as Cuba or Vietnam). And I think that China has practised imperialism in Tibet, and has tried to do so through its invasions and encroachments on Vietnamese territory since the early 1970s. The Soviet empire is now clearly breaking up, while Chinese imperialist efforts in the Indochinese countries have met stiff and, one hopes, decisive resistance.

Capitalist imperialism, however, is still flourishing. It operates especially through the support, often covert, of governments which favour the interests of the U.S. capitalist class, and through the extraction of economic surplus from the dominated countries by such means as withdrawal of profits, unequal trade and, especially recently, foreign debt.

In my article, "Anthropology and Imperialism," I noted that Western anthropologists had neglected the study of imperialism as a world system. I argued that in most cases dependence on the imperialist powers of their own countries, yet also on the good will of the people whose cultures and societies they studied, had tended to produce either an attempt at value-free social science (which is impossible), or a kind of liberal benevolence in which anthropologists worked for reforms in dependent societies rather than confronting the governments and the total system in which they operated. I noted that because of anti-communism in the Western imperialist countries, hardly any Western anthropologists had done field work in socialist societies, and that anthropologists did not usually even use the work of journalists and others who had lived in and written about socialist countries or were associated with revolutionary movements.

I tried to do a numerical calculation of the so-called Third World or "under-developed" countries, the results of which are presented in the accompanying table. I argued that shortly after World War II it had looked as if at least 37 percent of the Third World population—for example in India, Indonesia, Egypt, etc.—might progress in mixed economies under relatively independent governments, but that by the late 1960s it seemed that those countries, which I classified as "less dependent capitalist," were also coming more and more under the sway of capitalist imperialism, especially from the U.S.A.

I noted that about one third of the Third World populations had had revolutions and were moving towards socialism in systems which I saw as relatively independent.

About 2 percent of the world's people still lived in outright colonies in 1967, while about 28 percent lived under governments which might be called "neocolonial," as they were largely beholden to one or more imperialist powers and were likely to collapse if imperialist military and economic support were withdrawn.

Within this global setting, I noticed that in the late 1960s at least 20 Third World countries with a total population of 266 million—11 percent of the Third World population—possessed armed revolutionary socialist movements, while another 21 percent of the Third World peoples had large, unarmed revolutionary movements or parties with considerable popular support.

It seemed to me that Western anthropologists were entering a dilemma because they worked increasingly in countries that were undergoing revolutionary upheavals, yet they were funded by and dependent on counter-revolutionary, usually Western, governments and universities. I suggested that in spite of this dilemma, anthropologists should try to study socialist countries and revolutionary movements with as little bias as possible. I also proposed trying to compare the effects of Western capitalist and industrial socialist forms of

influence on Third World peoples, for example, by comparing United States influence on the Dominican Republic with Soviet influence on Cuba. Another suggestion was that we try to test, through research, André Gunder Frank's belief that per capita food production in non-communist Africa, Asia and Latin America had declined, often to pre-war levels, since 1960, whereas it had risen above pre-war levels in China and Cuba.

Before turning to the present, I want to note that it is not easy for anthropologists to study imperialism and report their findings and hypotheses boldly. We may think we are free and independent, but often we are not, or have not been in my experience. I'd like to mention three incidents where this was brought home to me.

The first of these occurred in October 1962 when I gave a lecture at the request of students at Brandeis University on the day of the Cuban missile crisis. I must admit it was a fairly passionate lecture, as I had been studying the Caribbean, had visited Trinidad and, in general, supported the Cuban revolution. I condemned the U.S. threats to Cuba, which the U.S. had already invaded at the Bay of Pigs in 1961, supported Cuba's right to defend itself, and spoke warmly of some of the reforms that Fidel Castro had introduced. As a result of this talk, the university president came down on me very severely. He made it known that I would never receive a permanent appointment at Brandeis, and after a series of incidents my husband and I were forced out of the university. We moved to the University of Oregon, but I was unable to find another regular teaching post until 1967.

A different dilemma presented itself in early 1967. The U.S. government brought in a ruling that students in universities and colleges would be classified by their draft boards in accordance with the grades they received. In general, students in good standing would be exempt from fighting in Vietnam, but students who failed exams would have to go. Feeling that this compromised the integrity of his subject and gave him an unjustifiable right of life and death over his students, David Aberle refused to fail any of them, and I informed my department that I would not grade the students in some sessional lectures that I was about to give. As a result my appointment was withdrawn, and David faced the embarrassing prospect of having other faculty grade his students. In some other universities, a number of faculty members were fired for refusing to grade their students. This situation contributed to our decision to move to Canada. Ironically, the draft board regulation was withdrawn while we were leaving.

For me, however, Canada proved less than hospitable for revolutionary socialists. I taught for two years at Simon Fraser University in a department about half of whose faculty were Marxists or left liberals. Too many extraordinary events happened for me to recount, but when my contract came up for renewal, although I was a senior professor, I was turned down by the Tenure

Committee on the grounds of "serious doubts about her scholarly objectivity and academic procedures."

The "scholarly objectivity" ruling, I later learned, arose because the committee—which did not contain any anthropologists or sociologists—had read only one of my articles, "Anthropology and Imperialism." Apparently they didn't like it. The "academic procedures" objection was based on the fact that our department had instituted student committees on par with those of the faculty for recommendations on such matters as curriculum, promotions and hiring. The administration and most of the university disapproved, and 11 of us, or half the department, who had supported the student committees, were fired. Five of us were dismissed in mid-year after a strike by students and faculty, even though a series of independent faculty committees from outside the university had judged that we should be reinstated.

As a result of this fiasco, Simon Fraser University was censured and boycotted for 15 years by most professional associations in the social sciences worldwide. The result for me, however, was that I could not find a regular teaching position locally until 1984, when the University of British Columbia offered me a professorship. I didn't take it then, as I was nearly 60 and was in the midst of research in India and Vietnam.

Although these events were painful at the time, I must note that I don't have the need to self-pity, for I was able to obtain grants and have had a wonderful time for 30 years studying revolutionary movements and societies. At times, however, I have felt wistful because my contact with students has been so limited. Some professors fared much worse than I did, and some chose or were forced to leave the universities.

In spite of such obstacles, universities in North America are more open now than they were in the 1960s, and research on imperialism has increased enormously. During the 1960s, national liberation movements in the Third World, the Black Liberation movement in the United States, the Women's Liberation movement and the anti-war movement smashed the intellectual strait-jacket that North Americans had suffered under since the McCarthy period, when Marxists and many left-liberals were cleaned out of universities and colleges—indeed, out of most forms of employment. Because of the shifts in power that occurred as a result of these new social movements, radical scholars were again able to find a footing in universities, even if only temporarily in some cases. Inside and outside the colleges, a large body of radical social science literature and debate arose. Much of it was in sociology and economics rather than anthropology or political science, but all disciplines were affected.

Following the publication of Paul Barran's *Political Economy of Growth* (1957) and Harry Magdoff's *The Age of Imperialism* (1968), André Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein have done more than most authors to try to

grasp the dynamics of imperialism and its changes through the centuries. Eric Wolf's *Europe and the Peoples Without History* is a major contribution, as are the works of Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, Edward Friedman and Mark Selden, John Bellamy Foster, Cheryl Payer, Eleanor Leacock and Susan George. Among studies of imperialism in particular regions, I have found Wolf's work on Central America, James Petras on Latin America, Thomas Hodgkin on Africa and Vietnam, and Gabriel Kolko, also Daniel Gettelman and his associates on Vietnam, among the most fruitful. My own work has been on the impact of imperialism in India and Vietnam.

A number of North American and other Western scholars have now worked in so-called communist countries, for example, Eleanor Smollett in Bulgaria, Michael Vickery and Ben Kiernan in Cambodia, a host of scholars in China, and Melanie Beresford, David Marr, Christine White, Jayne Werner and myself in Vietnam. But the list is too long to recount. And of course, as before, there have been excellent studies of imperialism, revolution and socialism by scholars in the Third World or outside Western universities by such authors as Paul Sweezy and Harry Magdoff, Darcy Ribeiro, Felix Greene, Wilfred Burchett, Arlene Eisen, Susan George and many more. In the late 1960s and later, journals sprang up that were devoted to radical scholarship on the Third World, for example, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, *Journal of Third World Studies* and several on south Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. Although there are still anthropologists who would deny that imperialism exists, it must be hard now to go through a university education in the social sciences without some knowledge of it. There are still, of course, anthropologists and other social scientists who work actively, sometimes covertly, in support of imperialism, but their influence is less menacing than when I first came to the United States in 1953.

Lest I sound too optimistic, it must be stressed that imperialism is as bloody and cruel as it ever was. In the last decade, we have had the British invasion of the Falklands/Malvinas Islands, British repression in Northern Ireland, the U.S. invasions of Lebanon, Grenada and Panama, the U.S. attack on Libya, South African support for invasions in Angola, Namibia and Mozambique, and "low-intensity warfare" (which is never low intensity for those at the receiving end) in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Angola and Nicaragua. China, too, has joined the CIA in harassing Vietnam and supporting the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Some might count the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as an imperialist adventure—one that the Soviets now regret. I am doubtful of that, for I think the Afghan government was worth supporting against the mullahs and the landlords. Some might also include the Vietnamese troops' warfare in Cambodia and the Cubans' in Angola, but I would not. My reasons are that, in both cases, those governments and troops went in to help the

working people of allied countries, much to their own cost and disadvantage. The allied governments had popular support, were trying to build more humane, egalitarian societies and were worth helping.

I want now to turn to the changing character of the world today and its significance for social scientists. The accompanying table gives a rough breakdown of the countries I have listed as "less developed" areas as of 1960, 1980 and 1990. Some of the countries I have listed as "less dependent capitalist" ought perhaps to belong to the "more heavily dependent capitalist" category, but I have given them the benefit of the doubt when I was uncertain. The category of "socialist countries" lists these as they are at present, but it may be that we shall shortly have to reclassify some of them, for example, Poland, East Germany and Hungary, as capitalist.

**Tentative Categories of States as
Percentages of World Population**

	1960	1980	1990
<i>"Developed" Countries</i>			
Capitalist	23.11	16.89	14.12
Socialist	11.56	9.47	8.21
Subtotal	34.67	26.36	22.33
<i>"Less Developed" Countries</i>			
Heavily dependent capitalist	19.69	27.27	28.79
Less dependent capitalist	24.17	19.29	22.71
Socialist	21.47	27.08	26.17
Subtotal	65.33	73.64	77.67

The first important change is that the populations of developed countries, both socialist and capitalist, have shrunk as a percentage of the world population since 1960. Together they have fallen from nearly 35 percent of the world population to just over 22 percent. This change has come about mainly because of population growth in the Third World at a time when birth rates were falling in most of the developed countries.

The capitalist "less developed countries" have grown the most as a category. This growth has been mainly in the poorest, most dependent states. The states I have called "less dependent capitalist LDCs" have stayed at much the same percentage of the world population as in 1960.

Now, as then, there are some countries such as South Africa, Israel, Spain and Portugal among LDCs which some authors call "semi-peripheral." They contribute less than 5 percent of the world population. Their per capita incomes average about \$4480 a year, as against an average of only \$908 per year for the other capitalist LDCs. Some former "semi-peripheral" states,

such as Argentina, have dropped into the low-income category since 1960 and have been reclassified. A few, notably the four "tigers" of Asia—Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan—have risen into the semi-peripheral category through industrialization or highly favourable trading positions. These countries are often cited as showcases for capitalist industrialization. They have, however, only a tiny percentage of the Third World population and are anomalies. In part, they were built up initially through capital-flight from China, or by industrial capital from the West as places of cheap labour to which transnational corporations could move their factories. There is little hope that the majority of Africans, Indians or Latin Americans could climb out of their deep poverty through the same route.

The number of socialist LDCs has grown as a percentage of the total since 1960, mainly through national liberation wars in Indochina and other previously dependent capitalist states. These countries, however, have not increased their percentage of the world population since 1980, for the 1980s saw few successful national liberation struggles except in Namibia.

In general, most socialist countries have not done well since 1960. Recently, we have seen the collapse of almost all communist governments in eastern Europe and severe conflict in the Soviet Union. The economies of the Soviet Union and all eastern European states are badly compromised, partly through too-heavy military burdens and the burden of aid to the Third World, partly through debts to the industrial capitalist states, but also no doubt because bureaucratic centralism has proved inadequate for building modern economies with high technology or for administering modern, highly educated populations.

In the Third World, too, a number of states like Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Congo (Brazzaville) and Mozambique are giving up one-party rule and turning to greater reliance on the market in order to try to develop their economies. Cuba is the most successful of the Third World socialist countries, but it has relied on generous Soviet aid, and may not be able to continue on its present path as that aid is withdrawn. China has travelled far along the road to capitalism. Without China, less-developed socialist countries claim only about 5.8 percent of the world population. At least at present, the future of the socialist states with vanguard communist parties is problematic. The average per capita annual income of the developed socialist countries is only \$4427, as opposed to more than \$13 000 in the industrial capitalist states. The average per capita income in the less-developed socialist states is reported to be only \$736, less than the \$908 of the capitalist LDCs excluding the semi-peripheral states. It should be noted, however, that socialist per capita incomes are actually higher than is reported in dollar terms for they include, as well as cash incomes, substantial amounts in welfare facilities and subsidized rents and consumer goods.

Meanwhile, the gap in wealth and technology between developed and underdeveloped capitalist states is widening alarmingly. Many more millions of people in the Third World are very poor and many more are starving than in 1960. Today, 40 million children die needlessly each year in the Third World, while the developed countries do less and less to aid them and draw more and more of their wealth from those countries. Susan George's book, *A Fate Worse than Debt*, graphically illustrates these horrors.

The gaps in incomes within industrial capitalist states are also widening. The capitalist world economy has been in a crisis since 1973, and almost every country has seen a decline in the incomes of most workers, a progressive deepening of recessions and, on average, greater unemployment. While the socialist "world" is in an obvious crisis, the capitalist "world" may be teetering on the edge of an abyss of financial collapse and depression worse than has been seen in this century.

At the same time, major shifts are occurring in the distribution of power among industrial capitalist states. U.S. imperialism, which reigned almost supreme until the mid-1970s, is declining in the face of its enormous foreign debt and budget deficit and of rebellions within its satraps. The U.S. may still be able to "win" in small countries like Grenada and Panama, but it cannot take on the whole of Central let alone of Latin America, nor the Middle East nor the Pacific. Western Europe and Japan must share the "burden" in the 1990s. They may expand their empires temporarily, or may be submerged in a world of depression. What they cannot do is plunge into a world war, as they did in periods of comparable inter-imperialist competition in 1914 and 1939. Some other ways out of the world crisis must be found. The only way that I can see is some form of world socialism—ultimately, of world communism—in which production and distribution are organized rationally within and between nations and working people have the main voice in the running of their societies.

The immediate outlook is admittedly rather gloomy for socialists and for most of the world's population. Yet I don't believe for a moment that this means that socialism is dead, or that we are at Francis Fukuyama's "End of History." I also don't think it is true, as some authorities in the West are telling us, that we have seen the end of national liberation struggles. At least four are going on at present, with strong chances of success—in El Salvador, the Philippines, Palestine and South Africa. The enormous size of the underdeveloped world, and the increasing, totally unnecessary poverty of most of it, suggest widespread national revolutions in the not-too-distant future. For the time being, these movements may not get much help from the older "socialist camp." The Soviet Union and the countries of eastern Europe are likely to turn inwards in the next few years in an effort to solve their own problems. It may be some time before their people realize that capitalism, or

reliance on industrial capitalist loans, is not the answer to their political and economic problems, and before they start to struggle for a new national and a new world order. But in the Third World, some countries, notably in Latin America, may begin to struggle collectively against the deprivations caused by capitalist imperialism. In many low-income countries, we may see various forms of revolutionary movement, military or non-violent, according to the circumstances.

We can also expect struggles in the industrial capitalist states on the part of workers, minorities, women and the unemployed, as the capitalist crisis deepens. In eastern Europe too it is unlikely that the workers who built Solidarity in the early 1980s will sit down indefinitely under the crippling prescriptions of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

What is still more probable is that we shall see worldwide struggles. Such struggles are essential now because the world economy has become more unitary since the 1960s and its most serious problems affect many countries, or even the whole world, simultaneously.

Three worldwide struggles are likely to be significant and will probably interact. One is the struggle for a New Economic Order which will redistribute the world's wealth among the industrial and low-income states. It was prescribed by the United Nations in 1975, and spelled out again by Gorbachev in 1985, and is long past due. If it does not happen, millions more will die young in the Third World and international conflict will grow.

The second struggle is for disarmament, both nuclear and so-called "conventional." We can see the interaction of this struggle with that for a New Economic Order when we consider that all of Vietnam's dilapidated roads, bridges, ports, transport and other kinds of infrastructure could be rebuilt for the price of a single B-52 bomber. Again, we are learning that nuclear power plants, quite apart from their relation to nuclear war, are too dangerous by themselves. The peace movement has had encouraging success in recent years. The disarmament initiatives of the Soviet Union and eastern Europe result not only from those countries' economic problems, but from the pressures of the European Nuclear Disarmament Movement. Whereas they condemned it five years ago, the Soviets now adopt its phrases and publicize its slogans. The West cannot go on indefinitely building horrendously dangerous and costly weapons when the threat they are supposed to be countering has disappeared.

The third worldwide struggle is, of course, for the environment. It is growing rapidly in every country and will probably be the most urgent movement of the 1990s. As well as being for survival, environmental struggles are ultimately necessarily opposed to both capitalism and bureaucratic centralism and are for some form of democratic socialism throughout the world.

On the eve of her assassination, the Polish revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg surveyed a scene in which the struggle for socialism outside the Soviet Union had temporarily failed and most people around her were announcing the impossibility of world communism. A similar pessimism has gripped parts of the left today but I think it is inappropriate, for with the end of old-style state centralism and repression the way is open for a better, freer, more democratic socialism for the world. And the need for it has never been more urgent. In last summer's *Monthly Review*, Daniel Singer quoted Rosa Luxemburg's challenge in the final article. I can't do better than repeat it, for it is a singularly appropriate riposte to those who are predicting the end of socialism.

"Order reigns in Berlin," she wrote. "You stupid lackeys. Your order is built on sand. Tomorrow the revolution will raise its head again and proclaim to your sorrow, amid a brass of trumpets: 'I was . . . I am . . . I shall always be.'"