

Imperialism and Primitive Accumulation: Notes on the New Scramble for Africa

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Abstract

This article recuperates the links between imperialism and primitive accumulation, arguing that the two are inherently connected. It undertakes a review of the literature to show that the links are deeper than is often recognized, as in the work of David Harvey. It also maps the stages of imperialism, their logics and characteristics, from the initial expansion of merchant capitalism, through monopoly capitalism and its financialization, which is now leading a 'new scramble'. The article shows how the various scrambles for Africa have evolved, including past and present land grabs, as well as the nature of resistance.

Keywords

imperialism, primitive accumulation, scramble, Africa

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Introduction

The global competition for Africa's land and natural resources is in full swing. It is a 'scramble' in the classic sense of the term, in that it involves monopolistic firms and major states in a 'geopolitical' struggle. This scramble has systemic determinants, as well as definite antecedents in Africa's recent past: the neoliberal prying open and financialization of national economies; the serial privatizations of state and communal property; the 'silent' alienation and concentration of land by domestic and foreign capital in the 1990s; and most dramatically, the proxy war in the Great Lakes region, after the collapse of the West's strategic pillar in Central Africa. The new scramble, therefore, consists in the geopolitical escalation of an ongoing process of primitive accumulation.

In this sense, it is similar to the scramble of the nineteenth century. However, it has a number of peculiarities which make it substantially different, of which three are significant: the new mode of highly financialized accumulation resulting from the spontaneous tendencies of monopoly capitalism; the entry of non-Western, semi-peripheral competitors in the race; and the existence of relatively autonomous capitalist states on the continent, born of the anti-colonial struggles of the twentieth century; unlike in the past, these have the potential to resist and form effective alliances on regional, continental, and inter-continental levels.

This means that the systemic determinants of the new scramble are also significantly different. Post-war capitalism matured and entered into crisis in the late-1960s, due largely to the maturation of the centre-periphery contradiction (Amin 2003; Arrighi 2003). This was the driving force of the systemic rivalry of the Cold War, which was, in effect, a Third World War, this time more clearly between North and South. It was a general war which resulted in the globalization of the states-system, as well as in the rise of a number of new development trajectories in the South, including the emergence of industrialized semi-peripheries and, not least, the unique experience of revolutionary China (Moyo and Yeros 2011).

The subsequent systemic crisis forced imperialism to adjust, but also to re-launch its global project by means of a new mode of accumulation, highly financialized and ever more predatory and parasitic. It succeeded in containing peripheral nationalism, bringing China back into the fold,

and even dismantling the Soviet Union. However, it could not reverse the clock on the states–system, or save itself from its own degeneration, or dispense with its industrialized semi-peripheries, or prevent the re-emergence of new social forces in the South (Moyo and Yeros 2005). It is no coincidence at all that the new scramble takes place at a time when the national question is being reclaimed in the global development agenda (Moyo and Yeros 2011). The decline of the West and the resurgence of its peripheries and semi-peripheries are the systemic parameters of both scramble and resistance.

The systemic contradictions of the last quarter-century have advanced in some regions more than others, reaching once again genocidal proportions. In Africa, the Great Lakes region became the epicentre of these contradictions, as state fracture and proxy wars became means of regaining strategic control over Central Africa. More direct and punctual interventions were repeatedly pursued in West Africa towards the same end, as state fracture spread from Liberia and Sierra Leone, to Guiné-Bissau and Côte d'Ivoire. Meanwhile, 'shock and awe' tactics of mass bombing campaigns over civilian populations, together with proxy wars and direct occupation, were unleashed against Yugoslavia and Western Asia, engulfing Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. New 'drone' surveillance and bombing technologies have now been added to the arsenal, which is again being mobilized in North Africa and the Middle East, to quash popular uprisings, tear down strategic obstacles, in Libya, Syria and Iran, bolster the Zionist state and obtain absolute dominance.

These have all been transparent attempts to re-establish order in North–South relations, as well as between strategic competitors, as they emerge, especially China. In line with the logic of atomic holocaust in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the objective is much more than to gain strategic position in one region or another, but to send a message throughout the system that the United States and its junior partners will enforce monopoly control over the world's resources and markets, 'by all means necessary' (Amin 2003; Wood 2002).

The re-militarization of all regions of the world is now advancing rapidly. The strategy in Africa has been spearheaded by AFRICOM, still with no base of its own, but effectively operating out of a number of countries, such as Uganda and Djibouti, under the rubric of the 'war on terror'. In Latin America, the strategy is pursued via the US Fourth Fleet and the expansion of bases in Colombia, ostensibly in a 'war on drugs'.

In Southern Africa, an ideological war on 'tyranny' and 'corruption' has accompanied a new destabilization campaign against radical nationalism, as advanced in Zimbabwe. Elsewhere, efforts are underway to co-opt India in a strategic relationship, while stepping up the military encirclement of China. The 'geopolitical' stakes may be higher in a nuclear-armed Asia, but the scramble is on everywhere, its dynamics are global, and its social and economic effects will be severe, if not genocidal.

In the case of Africa, the current scramble has its own historical specificities. These are related, first and foremost, to its pre-colonial integration in the world economy as a slave reserve, its relatively recent history of colonialism, and its settler experience. Together, these have yielded a process of primitive accumulation which has been more intense and more continuous than in any other continent over the centuries. The current experience with 'foreign land grabs', as we shall see, must be placed in this historical context. Second, the belated decolonization of the continent in the 1960s left little room for nation-building; indeed, between decolonization and neoliberal restructuring, less than two decades transpired, while in settler Africa specifically, the one was conditional upon the other.

Third, the racialized global culture woven by imperialism—a grossly underestimated component of European expansion since the slave trade—has yielded an enduring 'hierarchy' of peoples, including a special paternalism towards the African continent. The projection of 'models' of development to be emulated by Africa—what Jacques Depelchin (2004) would call the 'discovery syndrome'—or even the bowing to supposedly 'vanguard' social forces elsewhere—the 'abolitionist syndrome'—are real tendencies in the new scramble. While the two syndromes are deeply rooted in the Western psyche, the new non-Western competitors can also succumb to them.

Fourth, the recent experience of anti-colonial nationalism, and the continental solidarity which it evoked, has yielded a pan-nationalism whose potential is also unique (Mkandawire 2011). Despite its various historical shortcomings, pan-Africanist solidarity has been making a comeback, especially in Southern Africa, and has been crucial in defending against the escalation of imperialist aggression. Needless to say, this would have been an unthinkable feat a century ago. The pan-Africanist project must now be reclaimed, on new terms, towards a new policy of

collective self-reliance and resistance, as well as South–South solidarity based on a new strategy of non-alignment.

In what follows, the various issues above will be elaborated, with an interest in clarifying the links between imperialism, primitive accumulation, and scramble, as well as mapping the stages of imperialism and the dynamics of the current scramble.

Imperialism, Primitive Accumulation and Scramble

Recent debates on imperialism have resurrected an older concern with the relationship between imperialism and primitive accumulation. Perhaps the most quoted statement on the matter has been David Harvey's (2003) thesis on 'accumulation by dispossession', by which he has sought to demonstrate the permanent nature of primitive accumulation under capitalism, as more than just a one-off event establishing the historical conditions for expanded reproduction (the pure form of exploitation by capital over labour). However, there are a number of problems with this formulation which must concern us, especially Harvey's understanding of the function of the periphery.

A brief conceptual retrospective would be useful. Marx's own writings on primitive accumulation were more descriptive than systematic. His primary objective was to show how capitalism deploys 'extra-economic' force to separate peasants from the land and commodify both labour and land; and how the capitalist system, once created, continues to exploit labour by less transparent means, that is, by the appropriation of labour power beyond the labour time necessary for the social reproduction of the workforce. His critique was aimed at the apologists of capitalism, who saw in capitalism a 'liberation' of rational human beings from economic repression. Marx accepted generally that capitalist transformation was historically progressive, but he sought to dispel myths about both its birth and its mature form.

Subsequent analyses, as by Lenin (1996) and Rosa Luxemburg (1951), were prompted by the new wave of militarism and colonial expansion at the turn of the twentieth century, led by large monopolistic firms and major capitalist states in the now 'classic' scramble. The problem was to explain whether the scramble was a result of monopoly capitalism (in the case of Lenin), or an inherent need in capitalism to plunder

non-capitalist societies as a means of overcoming a chronic problem of 'underconsumption' (Luxemburg). Both emphasized, once again, the use of violent, extra-economic force, but they disagreed on the relationship between primitive accumulation and expanded reproduction. For Lenin, the scramble would yield the 'ultimate' stage of unequal development, marked by war and revolution, but one which could nonetheless establish conditions for expanded reproduction in the peripheries. For Luxemburg, the scramble would re-create the necessary organic relationship between expanded reproduction and primitive accumulation, escalating through relentless warfare, until the final exhaustion of non-capitalist societies, and hence, of capitalism itself.

Later developments might not have entirely vindicated the two theorists, but three aspects of their analyses were remarkably prescient: the monopoly form of capitalism did become its 'ultimate' form, even if enduring much longer and mutating in ways unexpected; primitive accumulation remained a fundamental dimension of capitalism, even if in ways more profound than those observed; and both monopoly and primitive accumulation have continued to require endless militarization. In the post-war period, these dynamics were best captured by the underdevelopment (or dependency) school, which went further than the above to establish the historical necessity of unequal development, under capitalism that is, the necessity of a centre-periphery contradiction on a world scale (Amin 1976; dos Santos 1978; Marini 1970, 2000; Patnaik 1972). Accordingly, exploitation under monopoly capitalism has assumed starkly different forms in centre and periphery, up to the present, with the weight of primitive accumulation falling largely on the latter. A systematic transfer of surplus value from the periphery to the centre, far beyond the initial investment, has been intrinsic to this relationship, whose mechanisms have included the repatriation of profits, interest payments, and dividends, the imposition of monopoly rents, as well as unequal exchange.¹ Moreover, through these mechanisms, the centre has been able to displace its own contradictions of accumulation to the periphery, thereby curtailing class conflict in the centre over a long period. The crisis that is now upon us, to the point of engulfing the centre itself, is arguably the terminal accumulation of systemic contradictions (Foster 2011; Minqi 2008).

An important aspect of this analysis is precisely the relationship of primitive accumulation to the process of accumulation as a whole. In the periphery, primitive accumulation has been more intense and

continuous—and this includes the semi-peripheries which have undergone dependent industrialization. What distinguishes the peripheries of the system is the extroverted nature of accumulation which, even among semi-peripheries, has set into motion a permanent process of semi-proletarianization (Moyo Yeros 2005). This involves the expulsion of small producers from the countryside ‘without’ their full absorption into the industrial or service sectors, or their permanent urbanization. This expelled population has a fundamental function in the world economy, not merely as a labour reserve which drives down wages all around (Foster et al. 2011b), but as a reserve which also ‘subsidizes’ the reproduction of capital by its own unremunerated labour. The self-exploitation of the semi-proletariat is a key dimension of super-exploitation, and is itself an extra-economic contribution to capital, in the sense of not being accounted for by the market. Notwithstanding Luxemburg, capitalism has extended its life by feeding off permanent semi-proletarianization, long after the exhaustion of non-capitalist societies.

This type of primitive accumulation assumes both rural and urban forms, with definite gender and generational implications: by the maintenance of family plots in the countryside for ‘subsistence’, a function generally performed by women; by the unremunerated labour, especially of women and children, for the social reproduction of the household; by the construction of self-housing in urban slums, mostly a male function; and by a myriad of petty activities geared towards the production of cheap wage goods and services, with differentiated forms of labour mobilization among men, women, and children (Moyo and Yeros 2005; Shivji 2009a). The neoliberal onslaught of recent years has intensified a pre-existing condition, be it by the commodification of land and social services, reductions in state subsidies to smallholder farmers or the concentration of capital at the expense of petty-commodity producers in general. On a global scale, we may affirm that capitalism has always sought to create the conditions for the perpetuation of non-remunerated labour outside the market and the displacement of the cost of social reproduction onto the labourers themselves.² That really-existing capitalism is organically linked to primitive accumulation, and that this consists in a structured centre-periphery relationship, is expressed not least in the appalling national statistics of maternal and infant mortality, malnutrition, illiteracy, and life expectancy—itself a form of systemic genocide (Moyo and Yeros 2005).

It remains important to make these points, and restore the theory of underdevelopment to its rightful place, for there is another ‘discovery syndrome’ in operation here which appropriates ideas while silencing their source (we might call it ‘intellectual primitive accumulation’), to the effect of producing a ‘friendlier’ theory of imperialism. This is the case of Harvey, whose arguments have been markedly different from those above. In his case, the permanent relationship between expanded reproduction and primitive accumulation, for which he argues, is not founded on a permanent centre–periphery contradiction and permanent semi-proletarianization. These he substitutes by a more fluid and indeterminate ‘space economy’, which is driven, especially in times of crisis, by a variety of ‘spatio-temporal fixes’, the most recent of which, since the 1970s, has brought primitive accumulation back to the forefront of accumulation as a whole.

Harvey’s lack of appreciation of the structured nature of the centre–periphery contradiction in historical capitalism is especially exemplified by his understanding of the process by which capitalism has expanded to the periphery in the last century. He expressly disassociates the nineteenth century scramble from the ‘logic of capital’ (now understood in a ‘pure’ sense), thus attributing the scramble to a distinct ‘territorial logic’, ‘contrary to the logic of capital’ (Harvey 2003: 140). This cleansing of capitalism of its impurities is repeated in his analysis of the post-World War II period, seen as driven by the logic of pure capitalism and its ‘spatio-temporal fixes’, and not as a universal centre–periphery conflict over the development of the productive forces in the periphery (Harvey 2003: 57–62, 115–24). Indeed, both inter-imperialist scramble and centre–periphery conflict appear as incidental to monopoly capitalism.

This unstructured analysis of imperialism extends to Harvey’s analysis of resistance to primitive accumulation. On the one hand, he takes recourse in a theory of ‘hegemony’, which necessarily underplays the emergence of the national liberation struggles, the role of the semi-proletarianized peasantry and the general war waged against them. On the other, he accentuates the lack of ideological convergence and organizational unity among the victims of primitive accumulation, to the point of obscuring the collective impact of their struggles on the system, which is, after all, the only way to account for the universalization of the states–system against the logic of monopoly capital: indeed, it is the emergence

of national liberation struggles that hampered the capacity of monopoly capital to reproduce itself by the unencumbered drain of surpluses. This, in turn, must go a long way to explain the post-war re-militarization of centre-periphery relations and the search for neo-colonial solutions, far beyond the need to maintain employment levels at the centre, as has been argued (Baran and Sweezy 1966). Indeed, whatever hegemonic 'consent' there was to post-war primitive accumulation; it was limited to tiny comprador classes.

With regards to the current period of neo-liberalism, there is a similar tendency in Harvey to highlight the 'stunning variety' of struggles and their lack of unity, as opposed to their common basis and collective potential: '[i]t is hard to imagine even connections between them', Harvey tells us (2003: 166). Once again, there is a lack of appreciation of the structural conditions that produce such struggles in peripheral societies. Yet, the leading force against primitive accumulation is once again the semi-proletariat, whose ranks have swelled in both town and country; its goal everywhere is to reclaim land and natural resources and affirm sovereignty over national development. The evident 'diversity' of the new struggles (feminist, 'indigenous', environmentalist) are also intelligible by the commonality of their structural conditions. Pushed to the limit under neo-liberalism, the escalating contradictions have opened a new space for the direct participation of women (for whom land is the most crucial element in the social reproduction of the household); propelled to the forefront the racially oppressed (who most often constitute the bulk of the semi-proletariat); and underpinned the ideal of environmental sustainability with a militant social agent (given the immediate destruction of the means of subsistence of the semi-proletariat as a whole). It should come as no surprise that, under neo-liberalism, these 'disjointed' contradictions have been lining up.

Finally, the diminishing of the function of the periphery and the political movements that it produces, leads us straight back to abolitionism. As Harvey provocatively suggests, the most that can be done for the peoples of the South is to 'return to a more benevolent "New Deal" imperialism', and to 'watch, wait, and hope' for the emergence of that missing vanguard social force at the centre that will bring it about (2003: 209, 212). Yet, a more astute analysis would suggest something different: the task, today as before, is to muster the political forces in the periphery to exercise the political autonomy that has already been

captured from monopoly capital. This will not only advance the goal of autonomous development immediately; it will also force the centre to face up to its internal contradictions, by depriving it of the capacity to displace them outwards.

The Stages of Imperialism

Besides identifying the function of primitive accumulation in the periphery, it is important to distinguish between successive stages of capitalist expansion, with an interest in the substantive transformations of the capitalist system. In what way is imperialism today different from the imperialisms of the past? In recent years, much of this debate has shifted to the study of successive ‘hegemonies’, which focus on the cyclical rise and fall of a singular leading state in the system, and less on the qualitative changes in the logic of capitalism. Where substantive changes are considered, they are conceptualized in terms of a changing ‘volume and dynamic density of economic transactions’ (Arrighi and Silver 1999), or in the supposed formation of a ‘transnational ruling class’, above and beyond nations and states (Cox 1987; Robinson 1996; van der Pijl 1984). The term hegemony itself is abstracted from Gramsci, for whom hegemony was intimately related to the rise of ‘civil society’ in discrete national settings. Clearly, it would be difficult to project hegemony onto the whole of imperialism, without the banalization of the concept: a ‘free’ civil society is a historically recent phenomenon and still highly restricted on a global scale (Moyo and Yeros 2007). Force is, and has always been, the essential feature of primitive accumulation, since the colonization of the Americas and the slave trade.

For Lenin, imperialism was, properly speaking, the property of capitalism in its monopoly stage, a qualitatively different type of capitalism. But insofar as ‘polarization’ between centres and peripheries, as we now know, is also an essential feature of imperialism, we ought to conclude that capitalism has been imperialist throughout its five-hundred-year history (Amin 2003). This does not mean that qualitative changes are negligible. What is qualitatively different under monopoly capitalism is the consolidation of a centre–periphery relationship under giant firms which precludes the rise and consolidation of new centres. Under competitive

capitalism, the rise of new centres and the decline of old ones was a cycle, which reproduced the centre–periphery relationship anew. A new historical cycle under monopoly capitalism is impossible—although, as we will see, it has indeed been possible for the same system to undergo notable economic and political mutations.

The key stages of the reproduction of the centre–periphery relationship must be sought in the type of capitalisms that have emerged. Mercantilism (1500–1800) was a pre-industrial form of capitalism in which primitive accumulation was exclusively its mode of operation. Led by merchant capital and chartered companies, it did not seek to establish capitalist relations of production in the peripheries. Instead, it implanted varieties of forced labour and, not least, it resurrected an archaic European slave system specially made for the Americas. It was also the most genocidal form of capitalism to date. This system gradually unravelled in the second half of the eighteenth century, by the onset of the industrial revolution and a cascade of social and political revolutions in both centres and peripheries (Moyo and Yeros 2011).

The nineteenth century set the terrain for a new type of imperialism, stretching until 1945, first under the leadership of small, competitive industrial capitals and then, at century's end, a highly monopolized form of corporate capitalism under the leadership of finance capital. By this means, expanded reproduction took hold in the centres of the system, but it required the escalation of primitive accumulation in the peripheries and the deployment of chartered companies anew. The export of manufactures and capital deepened the world market, while new forms of forced labour in the peripheries took hold, especially by the colonization of Africa, Asia and the Pacific. As Lenin rightly argued, the rise of monopolies and a financial oligarchy necessarily gave way to capital exports and the partition of the world. The determining factor of imperialist expansion was neither a generic underconsumption in the centre (Luxemburg 1951), nor merely technological advance (Hobsbawm 1994), but more precisely the centralization of capital under monopolistic firms (Patnaik 1986).

This 'classical' stage of monopoly capitalism was a period of intense centre–periphery and inter-imperialist conflict, which produced two general wars, a socialist revolution in Russia, and the emergence of liberation struggles throughout the periphery. The inter-imperialist dimension of the conflict consisted in a succession struggle over the leadership of

imperialist powers, which ultimately gave way to US-led order and a new period of peace between rival imperialists. However, even this post-war period can hardly be described as one of 'hegemony', as it became more clearly a generalized conflict between centres and peripheries over political independence and the development of the productive forces outside the centre. More properly understood, this was a phase of 'systemic rivalry' between monopoly capitalism and the social forces seeking an alternative, planned system, inspired on the experience of rapid development ushered in by the Soviet Union. In all, it was a tri-furcated rivalry between the West, the East and the South, but whose motive force remained the centre-periphery contradiction, especially as the Soviet Union, under bureaucratic sclerosis, would opt for 'peaceful co-existence' with the West (Amin 2003, Moyo and Yeros 2011).

It is this tri-furcated systemic rivalry that accounts for the emergence of new development paths. The rapid reconstruction of Europe and Japan was by no means on the immediate agenda of monopoly capital; nor was the industrialization of the periphery. Monopoly capital was forced to devise a new global strategy to contain the South by a strategy of remilitarization, large-scale financing and protection of select partners, and co-optation of nationalist movements. The strategy did not create a 'transnational ruling class', in the sense of superseding national rivalries. More precisely, as Germany and Japan recovered and competed with US monopolies, monopoly capital underwent a transition to a 'collective imperialism' (Amin 2003), a new and significantly different period of monopoly capitalism itself. Under the continued leadership of the United States, the Triad partners re-adjusted themselves to a coordinated governance of their monopolistic control over technology, finance, natural resources, media and weapons of mass destruction.

This was the first of the systemic mutations of the post-war period, in its political dimension. It does not amount to a new 'stage' of capitalism, but a 'phase' of capitalism in its monopoly stage. It has been accompanied by a deepening internationalization of production, under the aegis of diversely integrated multinational firms in all sectors of the world economy (Foster et al. 2011a). What this also means is that the capitalist system in the post-war period succeeded in eliminating its non-capitalist elements and subsuming the whole of the world economy more directly under its logic. This process was reinforced by the ongoing expulsion of populations from the countrysides of the peripheries and the formation

of ever-larger semi-proletariats, in an organic relationship with capital. Put differently, by the time that collective imperialism took hold, the world's labour reserves had for long ceased to rely on semi-distinct 'modes of productions'. Importantly, the simultaneous reintegration of China opened up the country's own massive labour force to the same reserve-creating forces underway in the rest of the South (Minqi 2008).

A second systemic mutation in the post-war period has been the reincarnation of finance capital, a process which is economic in character and intrinsic to the clinching of collective imperialism. This new financial system is not a mere replica of its late-nineteenth century counterpart. There is general agreement that one of the main differences is its relationship with the 'real economy': whereas finance capital in the prior period, as Lenin had observed, was still primarily linked to industrial expansion, and secondarily to speculative activities, in the current period there has been a shift in the centre of gravity from production to finance. Not only has finance gained a life of its own, industrial enterprises have themselves become 'financialized', in the sense of drawing an ever-larger part of their profits from financial instruments, including speculation on commodities, exchange rates and real estate. This amounts to a significant mutation in the mode of accumulation, designated as by John Bellamy Foster (2010a) as 'monopoly-finance capital'.

Unlike the monopoly capitalism of the early post-war period (Baran and Sweezy 1966), in which normal accumulation was conducted by adding to the stock of capital goods, today 'this is only one aspect of the process. Accumulation is also a matter of adding to the stock of financial assets' (Foster 2010a: 6). Thus, '[m]ore and more, the speculative asset-pricing structure, related to the inflation (or deflation) of paper titles to wealth, has come to hold sway over the "real" pricing structure associated with output (GDP)' (Foster 2010b: 7). In other words, asset-price bubbles have become the main engine of growth, from one bubble to the next. This type of capitalism has not spared the emerging semi-peripheries either, especially China, which have experienced rapid industrialization. China, too, has come to depend on this superficial 'wealth effect' of its major consumers in the West, as well as its own real estate bubbles.

The final mutation of monopoly capitalism is the rise of the industrialized semi-peripheries themselves. One of the post-war strategies of monopoly capital, in its drive to contain the South, was to select Southern

partners as proxies in regional stabilization, a policy which gained its fullest expression in the Nixon–Kissinger Doctrine (Litwak 1984). This strategy, moreover, combined with the ongoing developmentalist strategy ‘from below’, entailing the strengthening of bureaucratic apparatuses in support of domestic capital. According to Marini (1972, 1977), the result was the formation of a dependent form of monopoly capitalism, denoted as ‘sub-imperialism’. This monopoly capitalism was different from that of the centre, not only in its dependence, but also because it was not based on a class pact (that is, a positive relationship between productivity and wages); sub-imperialism was based on the ‘super-exploitation’ of domestic labour. It was natural, therefore, that, as it grew, it would require external markets for the resolution of its profit realization crisis; and for a while, there was no antagonistic contradiction between pursuing relatively autonomous regional objectives and remaining subservient to overall imperialist strategy. In the ensuing decades, the neoliberal assault on semi-peripheries has had contradictory effects, whereby the process of privatization, enhanced extroversion, and de-nationalization has been accompanied by the formation of new monopolistic blocs of domestic capitals, which are now vying for a place in the sun.

There has already been considerable debate in Africa and elsewhere as to the merits of the term sub-imperialism (Mandaza 1980; Nabudere n/d; Tandon 1982). The question today is really whether the ‘emerging’ semi-peripheries are essentially subservient regional stabilisers, or a force antagonistic to imperialism. Does the emergence of the semi-peripheries imply a system-changing diversification of economic partners among the South, as Arrighi (2003, 2007) and others have argued? Have the semi-peripheral bourgeoisies become, inadvertently, anti-systemic? Or is this the terminal conjunctural event which heralds the demise of the capitalist world economy (Foster and McChesney 2012; Minqi 2008)? We should not foreclose on such questions without further debate and analysis. But the more immediate political question concerns the type of alliances that are necessary to oppose imperialism, especially as it escalates its military project. Thus, we should also be asking: are all emerging semi-peripheries equally subservient, or antagonistic to imperialism? Do they have structural differences which manifest different political tendencies?

In fact, they differ significantly from each other. For example, Brazil and India are driven mainly by private blocs of capital, with strong public

financial support, in conjunction with Western-based finance capital; the case of China includes heavy participation by state-owned enterprises and banks; while in the case of South Africa, it is increasingly difficult to speak of an autonomous domestic bourgeoisie, given the extreme degree of de-nationalization of its economy in the post-apartheid period. The degree of participation in the Western military project is also different from one case to the next—although, one might retort, there is a ‘schizophrenia’ to all this, typical to ‘sub-imperialism’. Ironically, South Africa has signed up to a regional mutual defence pact, effectively against Western military interference in Southern Africa, while continuing to serve as a hub for Western economic interests on the continent. India has increasingly fallen into line with US strategy, especially in the nuclear field, but internal resistance remains significant. Brazil has zealously led the post-coup invasion of Haiti, in contradiction to its independent foreign policy aspirations on other matters. Russia has remained a blocking power in the UN Security Council, though it has not been entirely immune to co-optation tactics by NATO. China is the clearest counter-force to the West, consistently exercising full strategic autonomy, despite its economic dependence.

Their modes of engagement with Africa are no less diverse or contradictory. To be sure, all are beneficiaries of the neoliberal prying open of African economies, conducted since the 1980s under the aegis of the West and its multilateral agencies. Yet, they all maintain a higher sensitivity to matters of national sovereignty; even though there remains an unresolved race question everywhere, with paternalist tendencies towards Africa. Moreover, there is potential for the breaking of monopolies in certain sectors—and, by extension, the Western strangle hold—especially by China and its trade finance and oil-for-infrastructure strategies.

Issa Shivji (2009b: 9) has argued that Africa must now rekindle the spirit of non-alignment and pan-Africanism and ‘define its solidarity with the oppressed people against both established and developing imperial hegemonies’. In so doing, the positing of an equivalence between Western imperialism and the emerging semi-peripheries—already a strong and highly ideological tendency—must be avoided. Whatever one makes of the new semi-peripheries, they are certainly not the main agents of imperialism. Nor, for that matter, are they cohesive nations, given that their own accumulation strategies depend squarely on the super-exploitation of their own working classes en masse.

The first principle in the rekindling of non-alignment, as before, remains the non-participation in the military project of the West. The second is the devising of a strategy vis-à-vis both the West and emerging powers which would enable a larger degree of manoeuvre for national development; the longer-term goal would be to bring about an effective 'multipolar' world (Amin 2011). It implies not only resisting the West and 'looking South', but also setting conditions on investments from the South. In the end, such resistance can only be effective by collective strategies on the continental and sub-regional levels. Establishing mutual defence pacts, like in the Southern African case, would constitute a fundamental building block, as would new forms of regional integration, beyond rule-based, commercial integration, that should serve, in the first instance, agro-industrial coordination and food sovereignty (Moyo 2010).

Scramble and Resistance in Africa

To understand the new scramble for Africa, we must identify not only the overall systemic dynamics, but also their relation to regional dynamics and the changing object of the scramble. To be sure, a new phase of land alienation was already underway in the 1990s, under structural adjustment (Moyo 2008). To this was added a renewed interest in oil, gas and minerals at the turn of the century, until the most recent surge in land appropriation for the production of food and bio-fuels. Systemic pressures 'from above' and 'from below', plus conjunctural events all contributed to the scramble.

In relation to energy resources, the 9/11 attacks on US targets was a turning point. For it raised the prospect of prolonged instability in Western Asia, setting off a policy debate on the possibility of expanding oil production in Africa, as proposed by the Cheney Report on energy (NEPDG 2001). This, in turn, raised obvious concerns in China as to its possible exclusion from key sources of oil and shipping lanes, thereby compelling Beijing to fine-tune and upgrade its own Africa strategy over the following years (GoC 2006). The re-militarization of US strategy has been most closely associated with this dynamic.

But the less acknowledged source of the scramble has been the changing security context on the continent. And here, several inter-related

events shook the foundations of US geo-strategy. The first event was the political transition in South Africa. Controlled though it may have been, the transition nonetheless deprived collective imperialism of a staunch ally in Southern Africa. The second was the state fracture and war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), by which the United States lost its main pillar in Central Africa. Indeed, the two Cold War pillars of US strategy in these regions—the apartheid state and the Mobutu regime—collapsed in the space of a few years. The third event has been the re-radicalization of the liberation movement in Zimbabwe, which challenged outright the controlled character of the regional transitions to majority rule and independence. These events have been compounded by disputes over the control of Somalia and Sudan in the East, over Côte d’Ivoire in the West, and over North Africa, which again threaten the control over critical sources of energy. All these have thrust collective imperialism back into crisis and raised the stakes of the scramble. It is in this light that the establishment of AFRICOM—which was deemed unnecessary even at the height of the Cold War—must be seen. AFRICOM’s most immediate target may be China, but it is the loss of firm control over large swathes of the continent that has made it necessary.

If re-militarization is most closely linked to the scramble for oil, gas, and minerals, with deleterious political effects on states and regions, it is the scramble for agricultural land which will have the most immediate social effects. Much of the debate has entailed a blame game, directed especially towards non-Western competitors, or otherwise has sought to posit land alienation as presenting possible ‘opportunities’ for African states (Cotula et al. 2009; World Bank 2008). It is important to interrogate more carefully the causes of the land grabs, as well as their modes of operation and their developmental consequences.

The surge in land grabs caught the attention of the media and policy and academic circles only in 2008, on the back surging food commodity prices (Moyo 2010). The blame-game that ensued pointed the finger to the supposed increase in grain consumption by India and China; or to the food deficit countries of the Middle East and East Asia; or to the surge in the price of oil and, hence, farm inputs; or to the diversion of grain to bio-fuel production; or to the reduction of Western grain stocks due to weather-induced harvest failure, especially in Australia; or to the restriction of rice and wheat, albeit after the fact, by countries such as

Thailand, Vietnam, India, Russia, and Argentina. However, it has been convincingly shown that the diversion of food production to agro-fuels and the oil-related price increases accounted for 85 per cent of the food price increases (Ghosh 2008, Tabb 2008). These, in turn, have been determined by the ‘security’ and profit concerns of monopoly–finance capital—the Western agro-industrial complex, energy firms, and capital funds, whose underlying engine of accumulation is commodity speculation. The even deeper foundation of speculation is the established historical structure of demand compression in the South, which has undermined the capacity of the world’s peasantries to produce food crops (Patnaik 2008). Especially under neo-liberalism, enforced cuts in state expenditures, privatization and commercialization of state-owned enterprises, trade liberalization, financialization, and a new wave of land alienation have all taken their toll on global food security.

However, the ‘food crisis’ is only a recent determinant of the scramble for land in Africa (Moyo 2010). We must recall that land alienation has a longer, almost uninterrupted, history. The first major wave of land grabs accompanied colonial expansion, mainly in the Africa of the ‘reserves’ (Southern Africa, Algeria, Kenya) and in the ‘concessionary’ economies of Central Africa, via the establishment of mining and agricultural enclaves, but also, albeit to a much lesser extent, in the colonial trade economies of West Africa (Amin 1972). This wave lasted until the 1960s, before giving way to the developmentalist policies of the newly-independent states. The latter halted the thrust of colonial land alienation and sought to promote expanded reproduction among the peasantries. But land alienation did continue, through ongoing ‘modernisation’ and integration into the world market, the promotion of capitalist farmers and state-owned farming enterprises.

These experiments lasted for a relatively short time, before the continent as a whole was re-subordinated to intensified primitive accumulation. As it has been argued (Moyo 2010: 6), ‘[r]ather than enhancing the participation of the majority of small African producers, agrarian reforms [under neoliberalism] mainly sought commodity marketing and land tenure reforms, which led to the deeper integration into the world food system and prepared the ground for the current land grabbing’. During the 1990s, the commodification of land through the appropriation of land held under customary tenure, and its conversion into private property, expanded African land markets, but largely in newer ‘enclaves’. This

was the second large wave of land alienation on the continent. It was led by local capitalists under the wing of foreign capital and World Bank advice, which expanded activities to 'non-traditional' crops, such as cut flowers, horticulture, and tourism (Moyo 2000, 2008).

The current process of land alienation is widely experienced as the 'third wave'. It has combined with the scramble for energy resources to make for a robust scramble. It includes private investors and sovereign funds, from as far afield as the United States, Europe, China, South Korea, the Gulf States and Brazil (GRAIN 2008). It has been facilitated by neoliberal policy and land tenure changes, as well as the solid position that local and foreign capitalists have obtained. Much of the new land grabbing is associated with previously privatized large estates, but peasant 'communal' lands are also coming under threat. The real causes notwithstanding, there has been a systematic effort to justify the land acquisitions as a way of plugging, once and for all, the finance and technology gaps, so as to enhance productivity, utilize 'unutilized' land, obtain food security, and introduce 'green' farming. Externally-derived examples are once again being touted, with special emphasis on the 'Brazilian model'. One has to wonder where all the expelled populations will go. The real menace is of a twenty-first-century political economy whereby foreign-sponsored rentierism based in land and energy resources sustains large-scale rural expulsions, land degradation, and immiserization, while militarization and geopolitical disputes set off cycles of conflict with foot soldiers drawn from the selfsame expelled populations.

There is, of course, another scenario. It requires collective resistance to the US-led military project, such as in Southern Africa, and regional coordination on agro-industrial development, with the immediate purpose of strengthening small producers, democratizing communal land ownership, and expanding women's rights to land. Such resistance is already in force, not only in diffuse forms, but also in national policy. The recent experience of state support for small producers in Malawi against neoliberal advice, or the radical land reform in Zimbabwe and its inward-looking strategy, are the best examples of what is possible in the development front (Moyo and Yeros forthcoming). And it is here that the 'Look South' policy will stand or fall: either it will support the project of autonomous development on the continent, or deepen its integration into the world economy.

Notes

1. Differences of analysis among underdevelopment or dependency theorists need not detain us here.
2. Different terms, with different analytical emphases, have been employed to explain essentially the same phenomenon, such as 'super-exploitation' (Marini 1970), 'functional dualism' (de Janvry 1981), 'accumulation through encroachment' (P. Patnaik 2005), and 'demand compression' (U. Patnaik 1999).

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