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Imperialism and its discontents

There is war, so someone must be profiting, according to wisdom of the cultural elite

Mark F. Proudman

National Post

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At the time of the 1999 Kosovo War, I walked into a pub near the University of Ottawa, and heard an earnest young fellow doing a passable imitation of Bob Dylan. He then introduced a composition of his own, a response to the problems of the world, saying, "People are dying, so somebody must be making money."

There is war, so someone "must" be profiting: this is a widespread opinion. In 1918, the English poet Osbert Sitwell wrote of British policymakers as "those alchemists who converted blood into gold." The current British poet laureate, Andrew Motion, has asserted that George W. Bush was going to war for "elections, money, empire, oil and Dad." Canada's cultural elite last fall denounced the U.S. for using military power to achieve "political and economic ends."

Poets and crooners enjoy a dispensation from having to supply arguments and evidence for their claim that discreditable, hidden economic motives lie behind Western foreign policy. At present, the chief suspect is the only remaining Western great power, the United States. People often allege that the U.S. is "imperialist:" a heavily freighted word that implies the illegitimate and economically self-interested exercise of power.

We are assured that the U.S. is intent on exploiting the planet and its resources by means of a Pax Americana. "No blood for oil" runs the slogan. It is asserted that U.S. oil companies are driving policy and that the U.S. wants cheap oil -- though oil companies make more money when oil is expensive than when it is cheap.

In its cruder versions, this kind of thinking -- there are Americans, there are capitalists, and therefore there must be U.S. economic motives for war -- degenerates into a conspiracy theorizing that is impervious to contrary evidence. In its more sophisticated versions, theorists of imperialism allege that capitalism has an inherent need for war and empire; that, though wars may not make money, they are symptoms of the pathologies of an evil system.

The U.S. of course does not have an empire, but it is a capitalist and

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militarily dominant power, and therefore must be "imperialist." But though traditional empires, from the Roman to the British, probably did (at least in their early periods) make money for their owners, U.S. military engagements, from the Philippines to Vietnam to Iraq, have never made money. And though the U.S. military certainly protects the world order, an order from which the U.S. benefits, it is also true that France, Germany and other European nations benefit equally, while the U.S. pays the costs -- in blood and treasure.

Once it was accepted that imperial power made a nation rich. Now we find the very idea offensive. But in the past two centuries military power has ceased to be a source of wealth.

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Old-style empires, from the Greeks and Romans to the Spanish and early British empires, made money the old-fashioned way: They stole it.

Helen of Troy had the face that launched a thousand ships, but no reader of Homer can miss the prayer of the priest on behalf of the Greek armies: "May you have the broad streets of Troy to plunder." The Romans ran an empire on a similarly predatory basis: When the competing leaders of late republican Rome, the left-wing Marius for the "popular" party and the right-wing patrician Sulla for the "optimates," argued about who would lead a punitive expedition against the Asian kingdom of Pontus, the dispute was in large part about who would return fabulously wealthy with the plunder of the East.

The early modern empires of Portugal, Spain, France and Britain were the products of similar attempts to get rich quick. The Spanish were the most successful, annexing the gold and silver mines of Mexico and Peru, and making 16th-century Spain almost a synonym for gold. Though the other European powers did not find large quantities of gold, they hoped to: Royal concessions to the proprietors of the early Anglo-American colonies (such as Maryland, Pennsylvania and Carolina) granted to the king a fixed proportion of anticipated discoveries of gold -- though none was found.

The early European empires in Asia began as trading expeditions. Each power set up a company with a monopoly over regional trade; the most famous and successful was the British East India Company. The Company did not set out to conquer India. Like the Hudson's Bay Company in the Canadian North, its initial aim was to trade, in co-operation with native leaders. It was only after the better part of a century that the East India Company began campaigns of conquest, primarily as a result of attacks on company property in the wake of the collapse of the Mogul Empire. At the end of the 18th century, the East India Company had become the landlord of much of India. Its leaders, conquering "nabobs" such as Robert Clive and Warren Hastings, became vastly wealthy. A trading enterprise had become a territorial empire, and for its owners and managers a vastly profitable one. Subsequent imperialists of other nations looked upon the Indian empire with envy.

The phrase "Pax Americana" makes a double allusion: to the Pax Romana of Rome and the Pax Britannica of the 19th century. The latter term originally referred only to India, where the British conquests established peace for the first time in the history of the

sub-continent. That peace, like others imposed by a foreign power such as the Pax Romana and the Pax Americana, was interrupted by frequent frontier wars, as well as the Indian Mutiny of 1857. After the mutiny, the British government took over management of India from the East India Company: When the Indian empire ceased to pay, the taxpayer was graciously allowed to take over.

Sir Charles Dilke, a mid-19th century politician and traveller, pointed presciently to the difficulties of running a profitable empire, writing that "with centralization and railroads, we are creating an India that we shall not be able to fight." The belief that wealth is something tangible that can be taken by the stronger power is essentially pre-modern: Capitalist wealth takes other forms, and as Dilke saw, the character of its infrastructure makes old-fashioned plunder impossible.

Whether the British or the other European colonial empires of the 19th and 20th centuries made money for their metropolitan centres is doubtful. Some individuals did profit from imperial ventures, and more hoped to do so. But scholars find that imperial investments and trade made no greater profits than did other foreign or domestic activities. Indeed, chartered companies founded on the Indian model in the late 19th century to take control of British East Africa, Nigeria, Borneo and Cecil Rhodes' Rhodesia made little money, and some went bankrupt, notwithstanding the alluring precedent of the East India Company.

The colonial empires that grew rapidly in the late 19th century changed the way we think about empires. Only then did the term "imperialism," denoting expansionist overseas policies, enter the English language. The British empire, which covered a quarter of the global map with its trademark shade of light pink, had before the 1870s been only a motley collection of trading posts, self-governing colonies such as those that have become Canadian provinces and Australian states, and, of course, India -- the property of a private company. The term "empire" was not often applied to what we now think of as "the British Empire" before the mid-Victorian period.

From about 1870, imperialism -- conscious overseas expansion -- became fashionable. The British claimed large tracts of east and southern Africa. The French occupied most of west and north Africa. Other European powers such as Germany and Belgium grabbed colonies where they could. In Asia, the major powers competed for obscure islands. The Americans conquered the Philippines and Cuba from the Spanish in 1898. Competing traders and diplomats entered China; there was talk about the inevitable colonization of that country, perhaps by a consortium of Western powers.

Journalists, historians and social theorists rushed forward with explanations. Some spoke in Darwinist terms of the inevitable competition for resources and space. Others spoke of competition for trade, investment opportunities or regions for the settlement of the "surplus populations" of Europe's crowded cities. It is ironic that just as empires ceased to make money, a host of economic theories arose to explain them.

The Victorians had great confidence in scientific theories, and constructed ostensibly scientific theories of pretty well every thing, including history, economics and social change: Marx was only the best known of such theorists.

In 1902, the British liberal economist J.A. Hobson assembled these various themes into a coherent and comprehensive theory, to explain the great expansion of the late-19th-century empires. Hobson explained that capitalism created surpluses of capital that could not profitably be invested in domestic markets. Therefore, capital was exported to what we would call the Third World. But in Africa and Asia, capital and capitalists needed stability and military protection -- hence, in Hobson's account, the call for large and expanding colonial empires.

Hobson's theory explained that capitalism and business interests caused imperialism and hence war: it was a complete reversal of the older Victorian notion that capitalism and trade were inherently peaceful, a view that had roots in the great philosopher of capitalism, Adam Smith. Hobson had created the emblematic 20th-century understanding of imperialism, which Lenin married to Marx's theories. It became enormously influential with Third World anti-colonial leaders after the Second World War. It has been inherited by numerous academic theorists of "dependency," who see business links between advanced countries and less developed ones, and infer from these relations an exploitative relationship.

Where once "imperialism" had meant conquest and annexation, its presence is now inferred from business relationships, basing agreements, or even the mere purchase of oil or other resources. Colonialism, the phenomenon Hobson had tried to explain, was no longer a necessary ingredient of the theory. "Imperialism" has completely changed its meaning -- as politically loaded terms so often do.

It was the democratic capitalist powers, but rather the communist and fascist powers of the 20th century (a couple of the communists ones are still with us) that most readily assimilated Karl von Clausewitz' doctrine that war was the necessary instrument of politics. And it was the predecessors of democratic capitalism -- the pre-modern aristocracies and the ancient slave-owning empires -- which regarded war as their chief business, as indeed it was.

Only under capitalism has war not been accepted as an inevitable part of political life. Only in advanced democracies is war felt to be unnatural -- and so to need the kind of extensive and globally ambitious justifications that our political leaders have felt obliged to offer for the campaign in Iraq. No past empire would have gone into such moral agonies about an obvious victory over a hostile foreign power of the second rank.

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