INTRODUCTION

Anyone who talks about US 'imperialism' is likely to be challenged on the grounds that the US does not directly rule or occupy a single country, anywhere in the world.[1]

And that, indeed, is the difficulty in characterizing the 'new' imperialism. While a few colonial pockets still exist, neither the US nor any other major Western power is today a colonial empire in direct command of vast subject territories. Although the US has a military presence in about 140 countries, it cannot even be said that imperial power unambiguously imposes its rule through the medium of puppet regimes kept in place by imperial military power. Nor, for that matter, is there anything today like the commercial empires that once prevailed because they commanded trade routes by means of superior force or more advanced naval technology.

There was a time when not only colonial rule but economic exploitation of colonies by imperial powers was a fairly transparent business. Anyone observing the Spanish in South America, or, later,

the Belgians in the Congo, would have had no difficulty understanding the means by which the wealth of the subject was being transferred to the master. In that respect, traditional imperialism had much in common with certain domestic class relations. Just as there was nothing particularly opaque about the relationship between feudal lords and the peasants whose labour services or rents they appropriated, or between the absolutist state and the peasants whose taxes it extracted, the relationship between colonial masters and their subjects was reasonably clear: the one exerted the force, up to and including genocide, that compelled the others to forfeit their wealth.

In modern capitalism, the class relation between capital and labour is rather more difficult to decipher. Here, there is no direct transfer of surplus labour. The workers pay no rent, no tax or tribute, to their employers. There is no obvious way of distinguishing between what workers keep for themselves and what they forfeit to capital. In fact, far from extracting rent from workers, the employer pays them, in the form of a wage, and that payment appears to cover all the work the worker performs: eight hours' pay, for instance, for eight hours' work. It is not so easy to unravel how the workers create the wealth of capital by means of labour for which they receive no recompense, or, to put it another way, how capital derives more benefit, in the form of profit, from the workers' labour than the workers receive in exchange in the form of a wage. It may be self-evident to any reasonable person that capital accumulation could not take place without a net transfer of surplus labour from workers to capitalists, but how this comes about is far less clear. The Marxist theory of surplus value is a persuasive account of how this transfer takes place, but the fact that such a complex theory is required to explain what ought to be a fairly straightforward transaction testifies to the opacity of the relation between capital and labour.[2] The extraction of rents or taxes from a peasant – where it is obvious that

part of what the peasant produces goes to pay landlords or states, whether in kind, labour services or money – needs no such complicated theorization.

More particularly, in the absence of direct coercive force exerted by capital on labour, it is not immediately obvious what would *compel* the worker to forfeit surplus labour. The purely economic coercion that drives workers to sell their labour power for a wage is very different from the direct political or military powers that enabled lords or states in non-capitalist societies to exact rent, tax or tribute from direct producers. To be sure, the propertyless worker has little room for manoeuvre, when selling labour power in exchange for a wage is the only way of gaining access to the means of subsistence, even to the means of labour itself. But that compulsion is *impersonal*; and any coercion that operates here is, or so it appears, imposed not by men but by markets. On the face of it, that still seems a matter of choice, while the only formally acknowledged relationship between capitalists and workers – in sharp contrast, for example, to the juridically recognized relationship of domination and subordination between feudal lord and serf – is an exchange between legally free and equal individuals.

This is not the place to go into the intricacies of value theory or the measurement of the surplus value that represents the exploitation of labour by capital. The point here is simply that, whether or not we acknowledge that what passes between the worker and the capitalist is indeed exploitation, their relationship is not at all transparent, and the means by which, rightly or wrongly, the capitalist appropriates what the labourer produces is by its very nature obscure.

Much the same can be said about the nature of capitalist imperialism, and for much the same reasons. Today, it is harder than it was in earlier colonial empires to detect the transfer of wealth from

weaker to stronger nations. But even when it is painfully obvious that such a transfer is taking place, how it is accomplished is no less opaque than the relation between capital and labour, and this opacity leaves a great deal of room for denial. Here, too, there is typically no relationship of direct coercion. Here, too, the compulsions are likely to be 'economic', imposed not (directly) by masters but by markets. Here, too, the only formally recognized relationship is between legally free and equal entities, such as buyers and sellers, lenders and borrowers, or even ostensibly sovereign states.

What makes class domination or imperialism specifically *capitalist* is the predominance of economic, as distinct from direct 'extra-economic' – political, military, judicial – coercion. Yet this certainly does not mean that capitalist imperialism can dispense with extra-economic force. First, capitalism certainly does not rule out more traditional forms of coercive colonization. On the contrary, the history of capitalism is, needless to say, a very long and bloody story of conquest and colonial oppression; and, in any case, the development of economic imperatives powerful enough to replace older forms of direct rule has taken a very long time, coming to fruition only in the twentieth century. But, more particularly, capitalist imperialism even in its most mature form requires extra-economic support. Extra-economic force is clearly essential to the maintenance of economic coercion itself.

The difficulty, again, is that the role of extra-economic force, in capitalist imperialism as in capitalist class domination, is opaque, because in general it operates not by intervening directly in the relation between capital and labour, or between imperial and subordinate states, but more indirectly, by sustaining the system of economic compulsions, the system of property (and propertylessness) and the operation of markets. Even when direct force is applied in the struggle between classes – as when police arrest strikers – the

nature of the transaction is likely to be obscured by the ostensible neutrality of the coercive power. Especially in liberal democracies, with universal suffrage and fairly well established civil liberties, the police are not employed by capital but represent a state that, in principle, belongs to all citizens. Today, when powerful states launch military actions against weaker ones, we are given to understand that, here too, force is operating not imperially but neutrally, in the interests of an 'international community'.

To question this is not to say that police action, domestic or international, can never do anything but operate in the interests of a dominant class or imperial power. The point is simply that, in capitalism, even when it does so operate, its purposes are not transparent, as they were when feudal lords exercised their own coercive force against their peasants, or when old imperial states set out explicitly to conquer territory, establish colonies and impose their rule on subject peoples.

To understand the 'new imperialism' – indeed to determine whether it exists at all – requires us to understand the specificities of capitalist power and the nature of the relation between economic and 'extra-economic' force in capitalism. It will be argued in what follows that capitalism is unique in its capacity to detach economic from extra-economic power, and that this, among other things, implies that the economic power of capital can reach far beyond the grasp of any existing, or conceivable, political and military power. At the same time, capital's economic power cannot exist without the support of extra-economic force; and extra-economic force is today, as before, primarily supplied by the state.

The argument here is not that the power of capital in conditions of 'globalization' has escaped the control of the state and made the territorial state increasingly irrelevant. On the contrary, my argument is that the state is more essential than ever to capital, even, or

especially, in its global form. The political form of globalization is not a global state but a global system of multiple states, and the new imperialism takes its specific shape from the complex and contradictory relationship between capital's expansive economic power and the more limited reach of the extra-economic force that sustains it.

The conviction that we live in an increasingly stateless world – or, at least, a world in which an increasingly irrelevant state has been subordinated to a new kind of global 'sovereignty' – belongs not only to the mythology of conventional globalization theories. A fashionable book such as Philip Bobbitt's *The Shield of Achilles*, for all its claims that the state as such is not dead, insists that the territorial nation state has been replaced by the 'market state', in essence, a state with no boundaries. This is also the central premise of an ostensibly radical and iconoclastic work like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*, which argues that the nation state is giving way to a new form of stateless 'sovereignty' that is everywhere and nowhere.[3] The contrasting premise of my book is that such views not only miss something truly essential in today's global order but also leave us powerless to resist the empire of capital.

This book is not a history of imperialism. Although much of its argument will be historical, the purpose of its excursions into the history of empire is to bring into relief the specificity of capitalist imperialism by observing it against the contrasting background of other imperial forms. Some major cases, European and non-European, will not appear at all, or only in passing, such as, among others, the Inca, Portuguese, Ottoman and Mughal empires. The historical chapters will concentrate on a few important examples that were marked by one or another characteristic commonly associated with capitalism – the dominance of private property or the centrality of commerce – in order to highlight the essential ways in which even these cases differ from capitalist empire. Nor does the book claim to

be a comprehensive history of capitalist imperialism itself. Here, too, readers will no doubt think of cases that could and perhaps should have been mentioned, or they may object that there is not enough discussion of US imperialism before it matured into its present form. But the main objective of the book is not to present a thorough historical narrative. My purpose is rather to define the essence of capitalist imperialism, the better to understand how it operates today.

In Chapter 1, I shall briefly outline how the economic power of capital has detached itself from extra-economic force, sketching out, in very broad strokes, the relation between economic and political power in capitalism and what implications this has for the relation between the capitalist economy and the territorial state. Chapters 2 and 3 will consider several non-capitalist empires, to exemplify what I call the 'empire of property' (the Roman and Spanish), as against the imperial dominance of a bureaucratic central state (as in China), and the 'empire of commerce' (the Arab Muslim Empire, the Venetian and the Dutch).

The remaining chapters will deal with the development of capitalist imperialism, and the expansion of capitalism's economic imperatives, from the English domination of Ireland to their extension overseas in America, and from the 'second' British Empire in India to today's US-dominated 'globalization'. The final chapter will explore the role of military force in the new imperialism and the contradictions of a system in which a globalized economy is sustained by a system of multiple states – a system in which the extra-economic force of military power is becoming essential to imperialism in wholly new ways, taking new forms in the theory and practice of war.