

**Samir Saul, *L'impérialisme, passé et présent: Un essai*, Les Indes Savantes, Paris, 2023.**

In recent years, the evolving dynamics on the global stage, the increasing visibility of the structures of exploitation that define today's economic and social systems, and the violence these structures perpetuate, have prompted a renewed interest in the conceptual framework of imperialism.

The employment of this term, which has never fully disappeared, had remained the domain of certain heterodox academic sectors and political forces, following a similar trajectory of terms such as "capitalism" and "colonialism." The former was discredited in the 1990s due to its perceived lack of scientific value, particularly in the context of the "end of history" paradigm, which viewed capitalism as a transient historical structure, destined to be superseded by subsequent ones. In contrast, the latter remained confined to either defining past realities or the cultural sphere. After 2008, like the other two terms, the concept of imperialism is once again necessary, due to the dynamics at work, but also as a consequence of the actors that animate them – and this is even the case in countries in the global north.

This text aims to be twofold: it is both characterized by the scientific rigor that is proper to a scholar who, throughout his career, has focused on the penetration of French interests in North Africa, and it is characterized by broad accessibility for an audience other than specialists.

The objective is to re-establish the relationship between society and research, a relationship that, in the contemporary era, unfortunately has become more antagonistic because of the logics inherent to the functioning of universities, publishing houses, political-economic interests behind calls for funds, and the advancement of the careers of scholars with increasingly precarious positions. That is, the study of history and social dynamics aimed at society's self-reflection and the development of analytical tools to interrogate these dynamics. As articulated by the author in the introduction, this text is the culmination of a theoretical endeavor aimed at re-establishing the relationship between historical research and contemporary issues: "Ce livre consiste en une tentative d'élaborer une nouvelle interprétation de l'impérialisme, fondée sur une démarche historique". Theorization is regarded as both valid and necessary, functioning together with history in theoretical studies – or, as the author puts it, serving as a theoretical way of interpreting history. (p. 8).

Saul's writing restores this long-term perspective in a way that is both relevant and easy to understand – a vision first put forth by the second generation of the Annales school, which now seems to be less widely embraced by academic circles, both in France and elsewhere. Saul's text

takes its starting point from the emergence of state structures and the differentiation between agricultural and nomadic-pastoral societies in a time span starting 7,000 years ago and reaching the present day. The breadth of the historical period considered allows Saul to interrogate the historical dynamic – cleverly summarized in an accessible yet comprehensive text – based on certain key elements. Saul's central theme revolves around the relationship between the evolution of human societies and the rise and fall they help shape. Key elements of Saul's analysis are the following: the relationship between the state and the economy, and consequently between economics, politics, and war; the relationship between the development of the productive forces and the technologies employed in the economic context on the one hand and between the dynamics of expansion and recession of the capitalist economy in determining the forms through which the phenomenon of imperialism has declined at different times, on the other hand; the importance of economic crises in changing the structure of capitalism at a given time.

Saul's work elucidates that political domination for the purpose of extracting and appropriating wealth in its various forms is not a phenomenon exclusive to capitalism. The early chapters, focusing on the era from the rise of the first states to the modern period, are especially noteworthy. These chapters overcome a Eurocentric perspective. It is within the context of this system of social relations that imperialism assumes its contemporary form.

Saul's analysis, therefore, is an a posteriori one, based on a qualitative critical analysis of historical data, of the phenomenon of imperialism as a whole and in its multiple evolutions. The definition of imperialism that Saul offers in the course of the work is based on certain salient features, identified through a comparative analysis of its historical manifestations, considering the relationship between these, technological development, elements of a cultural nature, and the structure and dynamics of social relations. Saul defines imperialism by thoroughly examining its key components and comparing how different societies have viewed and portrayed themselves in relation to imperialism.

This approach enables the delineation of a multifaceted, long-term vision of imperialism, one that encompasses its various manifestations across different historical periods. The following section will highlight some distinctive features of this definition. Firstly, in contrast to Lenin's interpretation, Saul contends that imperialism does not signify a distinct phase of capitalism. Instead, he posits that imperialism is a fundamental phenomenon, an ancestral practice that capitalism adapts to its own evolving needs. A clear example of this adaptation is the mercantilist imperialism that occurred between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the mercantilist imperialism of the mid-nineteenth century,

the neo-mercantilist imperialism of the 1870-1914 period, and the U.S.-led imperialism that emerged during the twentieth century.

However, the theorization that Saul draws from his reading of the imperialist phenomenon differs from Schumpeter's literature on it. Saul's analysis suggests that, despite the "atavistic" character of imperialism, the "rationalization" of capitalism does not imply the overcoming of imperialism. Saul defines imperialism through the connection between economic forces and political actions shaping its sphere, which throughout history have been associated with violence, extermination, and slavery. Saul's conceptualization of imperialism encompasses not only political dynamics but also economic ones, positing that power differentials can give rise to imperialism.

The subsequent definition delineates imperialism as a system of international economic transfers utilizing extra-economic means, drawing parallels with the works of Polanyi and Marxist school analyses concerning primitive accumulation. The core of this dynamic is hoarding, which is facilitated by political interference, cultural penetration, and ideological pressure. In the contemporary era, these forces were also disseminated through the mass media and a more nuanced yet intricate network of representations.

Saul's analysis underscores the dual determinism in the imperialist relationship. On the one hand, it is driven by the necessity of the metropolitan economy and, on the other, by the exploitation of development or power differentials. In this sense, it can be argued that Saul's definition of imperialism is more influenced by the current analysis based on what in Marxist circles is called primitive accumulation, rather than the consideration of labor, its organization, and exploitation. This is attributable to the need to draw a definition of imperialism that applies not only to capitalist social relations, but also to pre-capitalist societies and revolves around the relationship between the two above-mentioned spheres, which is economic and extra-economic. In addition, the author explores the evolution of production and consumption, as well as its internationalization. The analysis also examines the technological evolution of production tools and the relationship between production relations and the characteristics of different societies.

The book is notable for its integration of diverse schools of thought on imperialism and their relationship to historical transformations. It provides a comprehensive analysis of economic thought from its origins to the present. The author's analysis is notable for its comprehensive coverage of economic history and the history of economic thought, characterized by its clarity and analytical acumen. Notably, Saul's work demonstrates a keen ability to grasp the mutual relations between different schools of thought and the contradictory nature of analytical evolution.

The author highlights Chapter 12 as a notable example because it skillfully presents the development of economic thought not simply as an intellectual debate, but as both a product and a driving force of its historical period. Additionally, the connection that Saul identifies between Keynesianism and the analysis of “imperialism”, as well as the development theory, is of particular interest.

The text shows a nuanced understanding of the interplay between Baran, Sweezy, and Keynes, highlighting how the theory of monopoly capital and over-accumulation intersects with both the Leninist and Keynesian traditions. Notably, the latter is positioned in opposition to the theoretical strands the author characterizes as liberal and reformist. Additionally, he examines the evolution of dependency theories, highlighting their divergence from classical Marxism following World War I and the subsequent developments in theories related to imperialism, culminating in a contemporary analysis that is both timely and insightful.

Finally, before returning to the definition of imperialism in the conclusions, Saul examines the significant shift in the 1970s and the transformations of Western imperialism, touching on issues such as dollar privilege, financialization, the U.S. shift from productive to rentier power, the indebtedness of the global South, and the re-emergence of Asia, with a focus on China. The analysis ends with a discussion of the Keynesian contradiction of productive offshoring. This contradiction has fostered the development of emerging economies capable of controlling their own growth path internally. It also hints at the emergence of a new international system, which will necessarily accompany the change in position of the U.S. economy and power.

In the final pages of the text, following a synopsis of the various phases that have characterized imperialism, the author emphasizes two points: the exacerbation of international contradictions and the increasing reliance on military force as a means of resolving political and economic contradictions. United States’ imperialism, on the one hand, and opposition to imperialism, on the other, gave form to the XXth-century struggle for development. The text, thus, concludes with two questions that are both contemporary and historically significant: how will the relationship between the working classes and the states that have been the architects of economic development following the struggle for independence evolve, and what will be the relationship – if at all possible to trace – between the working classes of the Global North and of the Global South, and what response will these bring to the underlying questions of imperialism?

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