

# Imperialism or globalisation? ... Or imperialism and globalisation: Theorising the international after Rosenberg's 'post-mortem'

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This article examines the concepts of globalisation and imperialism, both in terms of their explanatory status, and in the light of changes in the international order since the end of the Cold War. It does so both through detailed theoretical and empirical analysis, and in part through focusing on a key contributor to this debate, Justin Rosenberg. It is argued that Rosenberg's *theoretical* post-mortem for globalisation is correct. However, it is also argued that Rosenberg's *historical* post-mortem is far less convincing, not least when related to his subsequent attempts to draw on the concept of uneven and combined development in order to explain the reality of geopolitical conflict in the international order. It is here that the concept of imperialism enters the picture, and the article suggests that attempts to update theories of geopolitical competition based on Lenin and Bukharin's work on imperialism are unconvincing, as they fail to take full account of the changes in the international order since 1945. These changes — the internationalisation of capital and rise of global production networks, the rise of manufacturing in the developing world, the internationalisation of the state, cooperation between developed capitalist powers, and US hegemony — are well described, if not necessarily explained by the concept of globalisation. However, this does not mean that the concept of imperialism is no longer of use, and the idea is defended through a discussion of the hierarchies associated with the globalisation of production. It is further illustrated by relating liberal military intervention to this continued reality of global hierarchy and inequality in the international order. The article concludes by defending the ideas of imperialism and uneven and combined development, but argues that these cannot be used to explain the nature of the international *state* system (or geo-politics), but rather the hierarchies associated with the international *capitalist* order (or political economy).

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In the 1990s, many argued that the world had been so radically transformed that we at least needed to supplement, and possibly even transcend study of, 'the international'. But then in 2001, the 'old politics' of the international



returned with a vengeance, as the United States behaved in unilateral ways and fought wars against various foes, real and imagined. Paralleling these real-world trends, the academic study of international relations fought a strong campaign against the idea of globalisation, suggesting that the international had not been transcended, and that the idea of globalisation was full of contradictions. But this in turn was followed by a more multilateral second term for the Bush administration, and then the election of the Obama administration, which in turn gave advocates of globalisation (both as an analytical principle and a normative device) a new self-confidence.

Of course the parallels between different US administrations and academic analysis were never that simple and straightforward. Nonetheless, the boom in literature on imperialism that followed 2001, and especially the invasion of Iraq in 2003, has slowed down substantially, if not yet ended. The purpose of this article is to provide a critical assessment of the ideas of globalisation and imperialism. The essential argument is that while globalisation was never convincing in terms of the inflated claims to its explanatory status, it did (and does) capture important elements of the global political economy, unlike some attempts to revive the idea of imperialism. On the other hand, this does not mean that we should completely dispense with the idea of imperialism, and this is illustrated through a critical account of the global political economy and how this might relate to understanding specific imperialist practices.

Seen in this way, the article can be seen as an extended and updated engagement with Rosenberg's (2005) post-mortem for globalisation, and the case he makes for drawing on uneven and combined development for understanding international order (Rosenberg 2006, 2009, 2010). He usefully challenged the claims of the transformationalist perspective on globalisation in particular, which suggested that there had been such significant changes in the world order in recent times that these added up to something called globalisation. Much of the literature on globalisation conflated globalisation as description with globalisation as (theoretical) explanation, and Rosenberg provided a particularly convincing critique of what he called globalisation theory. However, he also suggested that globalisation was inadequate as a more descriptive account of changes in the international order in the 1990s, and that a proper social theory of the international could be used to both explain and describe these changes more effectively. Rosenberg, both in his post-mortem and in subsequent work, has particularly focused on the question of geopolitical competition between advanced capitalist states, and how Trotsky's (1970) theory of uneven and combined development can be expanded to account for these factors. This is an argument that was then further developed in the debates over imperialism since 2001.

This article engages both with Rosenberg's critique of globalisation theory and with the debates on imperialism that have coincided with, and in some



respects logically follow from, that critique. In the article, the following arguments are made. First, the critique of globalisation as a theory is accepted, but the critique of globalisation as historical description is not. Further, the argument is rejected that imperialism, in the sense of the primacy of geopolitical competition between developed capitalist states, is central to understanding the current international order. On the other hand, the reality of globalisation does not necessarily entail the end of imperialism, but this latter idea refers not to geopolitical competition between advanced capitalist states but instead to the political economy of free trade and the geopolitics of advanced capitalist states policing marginalised states in the international order. Following on from these arguments, the article concludes by suggesting that uneven and combined development cannot be utilised to explain the geo-politics of the international *state* system, but it can be used to help explain the spatial inequalities and hierarchies generated by the international *capitalist* order.

The article proceeds in the following way. First the debates over globalisation and imperialism are briefly reviewed; the argument is made that while globalisation as a theory is unconvincing, recent changes in the international order are sufficiently great to undermine the claims that classical Marxist theories of imperialism remain indispensable for understanding the international order. Second, the problems with some theorisations of imperialism are drawn out, and a partial defence of the idea of globalisation is made. However, the final two sections argue that we should not necessarily reject imperialism as a useful tool for describing certain characteristics of the current international order, first (in the section 'Globalisation and imperialism: the debate') by examining the persistence of cores and peripheries within contemporary globalisation, and second (in the section 'Globalisation, international capitalism and uneven development') by relating this discussion to cases of liberal intervention. The next section examines hierarchies in the international order, specifically in the context of the globalisation of manufacturing production, China's rise and its relationship to the US, and the global economic downturn since 2007. This discussion is used to emphasise how globalisation undoubtedly captures some important elements of the international order, thus undermining classical Marxist theories of imperialism, but at the same time there remain continued structured hierarchies in the international order. The section after that provides a critique of liberal interventionism, in part through an assessment of the concrete effects of these interventions, but also by linking these interventions to the reality of the structured hierarchies discussed in the section 'Globalisation and imperialism: the debate'. These links are then used to make the case that imperialism remains an indispensable category, but less in the sense of geopolitical relations between advanced capitalist states, and more in terms of the relations between advanced and less developed capitalist states.



## Globalisation and imperialism: the debate

This section examines the globalisation-imperialism debate. It starts by briefly outlining Rosenberg's critique of globalisation theory, and then moves on to examine approaches to globalisation that regard it as a specific period of capitalist development. Though some weaknesses are identified, particularly in relation to the US state, the utility of these approaches is partially defended, not least against those arguing for the continued utility of classical Marxist theories of imperialism.

### Globalisation: unconvincing theory

David Held and Tony McGrew (2007: 2) define globalisation as 'the intensification of worldwide social relations and interactions such that distant events acquire very localised impacts and vice versa'. This is linked to a 'stretching of social, political and economic activities', an 'intensification and growing magnitude of interconnectedness', the 'accelerating pace of transborder interactions', and the 'growing extensity, intensity and velocity of global interactions' (*ibid.*: 2–3). According to Held and McGrew (*ibid.*: 20), '[t]here has been a shift in the nature and form of political life. The distinctive form this has taken in the contemporary period is the emergence of "global politics" — the increasingly extensive form of political networks, interaction and rule-making activity'. This new global politics is said to challenge the previous Westphalian order of nation-states, which presumably characterised the international order after 1648 (Held *et al.* 1999: 50). Scholte (2000: 136) similarly argues that '[s]tate sovereignty depends on territorialism, where all events occur at fixed locations: either within territorial jurisdictions; or at designated points across tightly controlled borders. The end of territorialism has therefore brought the end of sovereignty'. Moreover, globalisation refers not only to a set of outcomes and/or processes, but actually becomes the *causal factor* in social explanation. Held *et al.* (1999: 7) argue that 'at the dawn of a new millennium, globalisation is a central driving force behind the rapid social, political and economic changes that are reshaping modern societies and world order'.

This is where Rosenberg (2000: 2) identifies a major weakness in what he calls globalisation theory, for 'globalisation as an outcome cannot be explained by invoking globalisation as a process tending towards that outcome'. It is one thing to identify rapid social, political and economic changes reshaping world order and call this globalisation, but quite another to argue that the causal 'driving force' behind these changes (or outcomes) is also globalisation. The central argument of globalisation theory thus becomes conflated, as it shifts from something that needed to be explained and more something that did the



explaining, and so ‘the causal properties of particular social relations that were undergoing spatio-temporal expansion or compression were instead attributed to the expansion or compression itself’ (Rosenberg 2000, 2005: 13).

But perhaps it was as much the character of the international order after 2001, which led to a revival of older theories of the international, based either on realist notions of power politics or on Marxist theories of imperialism. Rosenberg explicitly linked these two questions when he rejected globalisation as ‘yesterday’s zeitgeist’ (2005: 3), merely the social and political vacuum caused by rapid social and political change in the 1990s (*ibid.*: 48–58), which gave rise to ‘recent international developments — including the stymieing of the Kyoto Protocol, the crippling of the International Criminal Court, and the multiple crises of the international organisations (UN, NATO, EU) in the run up to the second Iraq war — [which] have been dominated by ... a vigorous re-assertion of great power national interests’ (*ibid.*: 3). There was a sense then that after the transitional period of the 1990s, international politics had returned to business as usual, which either meant rivalries between self-interested nation-states seeking to increase their security, or increased rivalries between advanced capitalist powers.

Related to these developments, some argued that the post-Cold War, or the post-2001 world, was giving rise to heightened geopolitical competition between advanced capitalist countries (Callinicos 2003: 104–5). This could be seen in the tensions in the run-up to the Iraq war, differences within NATO over the question of Russia, and between the European Union and the United States over how to respond to the financial crisis (Callinicos 2010: 95–105). In this way, Lenin (1977) and Bukharin’s (2003) focus on inter-imperialist rivalries was revived. Thus, according to Bellamy Foster (2003: 13) ‘inter-capitalist rivalry remains the hub of the imperialist wheel’. While recognising the significant changes that have occurred in the international order since the days of Lenin and Bukharin — US hegemony, a liberal international order, cooperation between advanced capitalist states, and the internationalisation of capital — Callinicos (2009) suggests that the classics retain considerable relevance. We return to these arguments below.

### **Globalisation: useful historical description**

In contrast to those arguing for the continued utility of classical Marxist theories of imperialism, Michael Hardt and Toni Negri (2004: xii) suggest that ‘contemporary global order can no longer be understood adequately in terms of imperialism as it was practised by the modern powers, based primarily on the sovereignty of the nation-state extended over foreign territory’. Bill Robinson’s theory of transnational capitalism similarly suggests that globalisation represents ‘an *epochal* shift’ involving ‘fundamental worldwide changes in



social structure that modify and even transform the very functioning of the system in which we live' (Robinson 2004: 4; see also Carroll 2010). For Robinson, globalisation has arisen as a product of the rise of transnational capital and a transnational capitalist class, and it has been facilitated by the revolution in communications technologies and transportation, which has created a genuinely global, as opposed to international, economy. Globalisation is distinguished from earlier periods of internationalisation, which mainly related to trade and finance. There has been an increase in direct foreign investment, including mergers and acquisitions between firms originating in different countries; the increased practice of subcontracting and outsourcing by companies to (local and foreign) suppliers; and the increase in trade between two or more subsidiaries of the same parent company. Thus, from 1996 to 2000, outsourcing by US firms increased from 100 billion USD to 345 billion USD (Robinson 2004: 18).

These developments transcend an older era of imperialism, and instead reflect the transnational interpenetration of all nation-states. Competition and conflict persists, but this 'is less a case of national states using their power to win export markets for territorially based corporations than one of competition among transnational conglomerates seeking advantage over competitors through corporate dominance achieved via the global integration of production facilities and seeking the favor of a multiplicity of states' (Robinson 2004: 130). The nation-state is 'neither retaining its primacy nor disappearing but becoming transformed and absorbed into a TNS (transnational state)' (Robinson 2002: 210). While there is no transnational military apparatus, the US military is operating not on behalf of the US state, but for transnational capital in general. Thus, '[t]he empire of capital is located in Washington' (Robinson 2004: 140). This is very different from the territorial exclusiveness — based on monopolistic trading practices as much as formal colonialism — that characterised the imperialism of Lenin's day. Robinson (2010: 70) again usefully summarises the difference when he states that 'I know of no single IMF [International Monetary Fund] structural adjustment programme that creates conditions in the intervened country that favours "US" capital in any special way, rather than opening up the intervened country, its labour and resources to capitalists from any corner of the world. This outcome is in sharp distinction to earlier imperialism, in which a particular core country sealed off the colonised country or sphere of influence as its own exclusive preserve for exploitation'.

Robinson's work thus identifies some real changes: an open-door policy towards foreign investment, trade, and to some extent finance; the resultant internationalisation of capital; and cooperation between advanced capitalist states. These changes radically differentiate the current international order from the one that concerned classical Marxist theories of imperialism.



The clear implication is that the globalisation of the economy had rendered inter-imperialist rivalries redundant. Thus, accepting parts of Robinson's argument, we can argue that *while Rosenberg's critique of globalisation theory retains much of its power, his outright rejection of the idea of globalisation is less convincing*. Gamble (2005: 365) is thus correct to argue that 'Rosenberg makes a compelling case for treating this as the fourth major conjuncture of the capitalist epoch, although he does not seem to regard it as such'. This is a post-Cold War world where international capitalism has been restructured along neo-liberal lines, with greater interpenetration of capital and increasingly internationalised states.

In contrast, Rosenberg (2005: 53) wants to hold on to older certainties, for instance when he claims that 'all the expectations of "global governance" seemed to have made no difference at all to the basic character of geopolitical competition and rivalry among the great powers themselves'. One need not accept the inflated claims made on behalf of advocates of global governance, but to reject this by recourse to older imperialist or realist notions of great power rivalries is unconvincing. Gamble (2005: 371; see also Green 2002: 42, 48, 53–4; Went 2002–2003: 490) again is instructive, pointing out that Rosenberg 'dismisses the normative hopes of some of the globalization theorists for a more benign world order after the demise of the last great territorial empire of the modern world, apparently believing that great power rivalry will quickly resume. In many ways, however, the structure of collective hegemony, which is now in place in the global economy, is far deeper and more extensive than that which existed in the 19th century'. And this brings us back to the question of imperialism.

### **Classical Marxist theories of imperialism revived?**

Some argue that the changes identified by Robinson and others are not sufficiently great to add up to a new era that renders classical Marxist theories of imperialism irrelevant. Callinicos for example accepts that there have been significant changes in the international order since the days of Lenin and Bukharin, but argues that geopolitical competition between major capitalist states remains a central feature of the international order. He focuses on the importance of uneven development, not only in understanding the current imperialist order, stressing the continued importance of spatial domination and marginalisation, but also for understanding contemporary geopolitical competition between capitalist states. Following on from Lenin, he suggests that cooperation between states is likely ultimately to be trumped by competition between them, and this reflects the uneven development of the international order (Callinicos 2009: 213–27). He also implicitly challenges liberal peace theories — and Kautsky's theory of ultra-imperialism — by



suggesting that interdependence does not lead to pacific relations between capitalist powers, and indeed may promote conflict (*ibid.*: 64–5, 221). Callinicos' argument rests on two contentions. The first is that 'capitalism's inherent tendencies to uneven and combined development are the source of a powerful centrifugal drive that helps to keep states multiple' (*ibid.*: 92). Thus in this case, uneven (and combined) development effectively does the theoretical work that anarchy does in the case of neo-realism (Waltz 1979), namely explaining the centrality of conflict between states in the international order. Callinicos's second contention is that interdependence between states existed before the First World War (leading Norman Angell to predict that war was impossible), but this did not stop conflict or indeed war between states (Callinicos 2009: 221).

However, uneven development takes place within as well as between states; this in itself does not preclude the possibility of the formation of a state at a national level (Davidson 2009) or, by extension, cooperation between states at an international level. There may sometimes be conflict in both national and international processes, but this will be contingent on a number of factors, and the necessity of the primacy of competition over cooperation cannot be read off from a theory of uneven development. The issue of contingency is important because Kautsky's theory is not the same as liberal peace theory — the latter suggests inevitable peace between liberal countries based on commercial relations, in contrast to Lenin's argument that such relations promoted war. Kautsky forged a position between these two, suggesting neither inevitable peace nor inevitable conflict, but rather the possibility of cooperation between core capitalist powers, even in the context of uneven development and (formal or informal) domination of some territories by others. What Kautsky (1970: 44–5) argued was that '[t]here is no *economic* necessity for continuing the arms race after the World War, even from the standpoint of the capitalist class itself, with the exception of at most certain armaments interests. On the contrary, the capitalist economy is seriously threatened precisely by the contradictions between its states'. At some point in the future, capitalist states could potentially unite in a new era of cooperation or *ultra-imperialism*, 'a holy alliance of the imperialists' (*ibid.*: 46), who would agree on how the world should be divided. This focus on contingency thus undermines the argument that competition between states is a necessary and constituent outcome of uneven development. Thus, to borrow from Alexander Wendt (1992), just as anarchy cannot *a priori* be assumed to demonstrate the prominence of competition over cooperation, neither can uneven development. In terms of geo-politics then, uneven development is what states make of it.

Callinicos at times comes close to accepting this argument, for instance when he suggests that the crisis of the 1970s led to greater openness due to the benefits that accrued to some capitalist states from participation in





'transnational liberal space' (Callinicos 2009: 178). He also casts doubt on the view that China is set on a path of challenging US hegemony (*ibid.*: 219), or that 'collision between China and the US is inevitable' (*ibid.*: 220). But he also approvingly cites Barbieri's (2002) argument that economic interdependence between states makes them more, rather than less, likely to engage in military conflict with each other (Callinicos 2009: 221), and argues that conflict is likely to increase in the context of slower growth and a relative redistribution of economic and political power (*ibid.*: 218). This argument overlaps closely with Waltz's (2000: 14) contention that 'interdependence promotes war as well as peace'. Even in the case of German, French, and Russian opposition to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Callinicos 2005; Rosenberg 2005: 61), these tensions were followed by substantial cooperation over the conduct of the war, including collaboration on the part of French and German intelligence services with the US, the use by US forces of European airspace during the war, and collaboration with the CIA over flights carrying alleged terrorists to secret torture centres (Cafruny and Ryner 2007: 106). The much-vaunted plan for a European Common Security and Defence Policy is regarded by both the US and major European powers only as a supplement, rather than an alternative, to NATO and US leadership, and the EU's military capability is about one-tenth that of the US (Cafruny and Ryner 2007: 117–19). We might add that the EU's current concerns are focused far more on crises in the eurozone, which puts any notion of hegemonic rivalry with the US into perspective.

But perhaps the most basic measure of conflict between states, for both realists and Leninists, is military power. Writing from the former perspective, Mearsheimer (2001: 5) argues, that '[g]reat powers are determined on the basis of their relative military capability'. However, if this is the case, then we need to ask: has there been no attempt to balance against the United States in recent years? On the basis of constant (2005) values, US military spending stood at approximately 550,000 million USD in 2008, compared to 70,000 million USD for China. This represented an increase of 40,000 million USD for China since 2000, but US spending increased by 350,000 million USD over the same period (Young 2010: 8). The US spends about 45.3 per cent of the total global military budget, more than the next 45 largest military spenders combined. In contrast, China spends just 4.3 per cent of the global military budget (Breslin 2010: 59; Dumbrell 2010: 19). An alternative realist account suggests that there has not been any overt balancing against the United States because the US is essentially a uni-polar power (Wohlforth and Brooks 2008). What this essentially means is that the US is so powerful that it makes no sense for any rising power to balance against it, and instead states such as China are more likely to adopt a policy of bandwagoning. In other words they consciously choose to embrace, albeit perhaps selectively, the US-led international order, in order to share in the gains of that order, and thus avoid a confrontation with a



stronger power. This ‘defensive realist’ approach suggests that China’s rise might be exaggerated, or at least that it is not so significant as to present a real threat to US hegemony in the foreseeable future (Chan 2008). But this is hardly a scenario of heightened geopolitical competition between the US and its supposed hegemonic challengers.

Despite the qualifications made by those highlighting the continued importance of Lenin and Bukharin, what their account amounts to is an acceptance of an ongoing cycle of geopolitical competition taking place between great powers — what Rosenberg (2005: 78) himself referred to as ‘recurrence and repetition’. And this, as Rosenberg (2009: 109) himself points out, is problematic:

my attempted sublation of realism has indeed broadly taken the following form: uneven development produces political multiplicity; and through this political multiplicity, that same unevenness super-adds a class of anarchical causes to the nature of social development. But how exactly is this second link — multiplicity generates anarchy — being conceived? Without the link being forged in some form, my chain of reasoning would fall short of showing how [uneven and combined development] can encompass the real world phenomena to which realism corresponds. Forge it in the wrong way, however, and that same chain of reasoning is no longer providing an alternative to realism — it is offering a spurious anchorage.

### **The US state and global capitalism**

The post-war Bretton Woods order of fixed exchange rates, neo-Keynesian expansionary policies, welfare states and (in the Third World) developmentalist states, saw the promotion of a liberal international order, but it was also an era of transition (Panitch and Konings 2008: 21–5). In the post-war period the US ran balance of payments deficits to stimulate the international economy with US dollars. This period saw the expansion of trade and production, and a growing internationalisation of capital as multinational companies invested in a variety of countries. The very success of this so-called golden age (Glyn *et al.* 1992) facilitated not only the internationalisation of production, but the internationalisation of finance, including offshore banking and the Eurodollar market. This in turn stimulated financial accumulation, which increasingly bypassed the regulations that were essential to the financial repression of the neo-Keynesian era. At the same time, the US-led system led to the recovery and rise of competitors, which undermined US hegemony. Financial expansion soared in the context of the breakdown of Bretton Woods and the shift from a fixed exchange rate system, with for instance all manner of hedge funds developing in response to the uncertainties caused by trading in fluctuating



currency values. But these very same funds became a source of instability as they were also used to speculate against the price of certain commodities and currencies. The 1970s also saw the further stimulation of the market in international US dollars, as oil producers placed their increased wealth in various financial institutions, which then lent this money to Latin America in particular. From 1979, the US responded to the inflationary crisis by massively increasing interest rates, which led to recession and unemployment in the developed world, and unsustainable debt in the developing world (Kiely 2005: Ch.3).

In other words, the crisis of the Bretton Woods order in the 1970s was resolved, not by the return of the fragmented national capitalisms of the era of classical imperialism, but rather by the extension and expansion of the liberal international order and the internationalisation of both capital and states. This is precisely what Robinson identifies, and he rightly suggests that it undermines the continued relevance of classical Marxist theories of imperialism.

However, Robinson fails to theorise adequately the role of the nation-state, and the US state in particular, in this process. Though still critical of its alleged state-centrism, Robinson is clearly influenced by neo-Gramscian international relations theory, and Robert Cox in particular (Robinson 2005). For Cox (1981: 138, 1992: 30–1), the international system is composed of social forces (derived above all from the process of production), state forms (derived from state-society complexes), and world orders, which are particular configurations of social forces that define relations between states. What is less clear in his account is how these factors are internally related, with the result that his analysis is ‘characterized by a constant tension between the need to talk about structures and material relations, and a desire to emphasise the subjective, intersubjective, constructed, contested and imagined nature of the social world. Rather than working together, the two conceptions usually sit side by side’ (Ayers 2008: 10). The result is that ‘Cox has had to locate the sources of “structural” change mostly in the instrumental agency of elite forces’ (*ibid.*). This weakness is also apparent in the work of Robinson, where ‘[i]t is never entirely clear ... whether it is globalisation that has created new forms of class alliances or the new elite that is guiding the transformation of states and economies’ (Joseph 2008: 81). This leads to an explanation that a new transnational class acting as a class for itself, in isolation from other social forces and nation-states, has brought about a new epoch of capitalist development. This is a crucial weakness for, as Joseph (*ibid.*) contends, ‘[r]ather than focusing at the level of actors as Cox and Robinson tend to do — thus getting sucked into a discussion about the formation of a transnational ruling class — it is better to focus on changes in forms of regulation and accumulation and the relationship of these hegemonic projects, state strategies and governmentality’. And it is precisely here that the leading role of the US state in regulating this



liberal international order needs to be highlighted, and was 'defined above all by the American state's successfully overcoming the earlier fragmentation of capitalism into rival empires. The unique informal empire it now fashioned was characterized, most notably, by the US state's economic penetration of, and close institutional linkages with, the other advanced capitalist states' (Panitch and Konings 2008: 19).

Moreover, this was the start of the shift, *not from a realist to a globalised world, as globalisation theory would have it, but from a neo-Keynesian to a neo-liberal one*. However, in contrast to neo-Gramscian approaches, this should not be seen as a response to a transnational class acting in its own interests independently of states. Rather, nation-states, and above all the US state, have been major actors in the restructuring of capitalism. Domestic accumulation has become increasingly subordinated to international imperatives, as companies increasingly internationalise and integrate across national borders (as Robinson shows), with global finance playing a leading role in mediating and leading these processes. The globalisation of production and finance identified by Robinson is thus an outcome of these processes of restructuring, and not something that happens 'above' the nation-state, a point recognised by some neo-Gramscians (Gill 1995).

What my discussion suggests so far, then, is that Rosenberg's critique of globalisation as a theoretical explanation is powerful. However, his post-mortem for globalisation as a historical period within capitalism — and acceptance of the continued utility of classical Marxist theories of imperialism (Rosenberg in Callinicos and Rosenberg 2010: 150) — is far less powerful. Robinson on the other hand rightly identifies important changes in the international order but neglects the crucial role of the US state since 1945 in this process. Does this mean then that we reject the concept of imperialism, and simply accept that the US state is the primary state in the international order? Or, put more bluntly, should we talk of the US less as an imperialist state and more as a state that promotes the diffusion and dispersal of capitalism throughout the globe? Or, to paraphrase an old Marxist argument in favour of imperialism (Warren 1980), is US imperialism the pioneer of capitalism? The next two sections suggest a more nuanced approach and defend the idea of imperialism based on structured hierarchies, or cores and peripheries, in the international order.

### **Globalisation, international capitalism and uneven development**

In defending his transnational capitalism thesis, Robinson (2004: 99) contends that with the erosion of territorialised space, the 'particular spatial form of the uneven development of capitalism is being overcome by the globalization of



capital and markets and the *gradual equalization of accumulation conditions this entails*'. This leads him to suggest that '[w]orldwide convergence, through the global restructuring of capitalism, means that the geographic breakdown of the world into north-south, core-periphery or First and Third worlds, while still significant, is diminishing in importance' (Burbach and Robinson 1999: 27–8). Becker and Sklar (1987: 14) similarly argue that 'imperialism — the domination of one people by another — will be (is being) superseded by transnational class domination of the world as a whole'. This section suggests that in contrast to these contentions, the rise of globalised 'transnational capitalism' does not mean the post-imperialist 'end of the domination of one people by another' nor the 'equalization of the conditions of accumulation'. What is needed then for any adequate account of the political economy of contemporary imperialism is an understanding of the uneven and unequal effects of the global accumulation of capital, and how this is related to the international state system. Much of the debate over imperialism focused on precisely this issue, with the influence of different strands of dependency theory in the 1970s (Frank 1969; Rodney 1972; Cardoso and Falletto 1974; Amin 1976). Some of the claims made by theories of underdevelopment in particular were very problematic, resting as they did on a functionalist account of the relationship between core and peripheral states, in which the former developed solely by the underdevelopment of the latter in what was wrongly assumed to be a zero-sum game. But dependency as an idea was always far richer than the crudest theories of underdevelopment (Palma 1978; Larrain 1989; Kay 1991), and the central premise — that some nation-states are subordinate in the international order, and this can partly be explained as being a consequence of the spatial hierarchies generated by global capital accumulation — remains a useful one (Leys and Saul 2006).

This section suggests that uneven development is best utilised to explain the continued dominance of some states over others as a consequence in part of the uneven development of international capitalism. This is in contrast to those accounts of imperialism, which use uneven development to explain in part geopolitical competition between developed capitalist states. The argument is made through a discussion of two connected issues: first, the globalisation of manufacturing production and second, China's rise and the US' 'decline', both generally and in the context of the global economic crisis since 2007.

### **The globalisation of manufacturing production**

One of the chief characteristics of imperialism was an international division of labour in which the imperialist countries produced manufactured goods and the colonies and semi-colonies concentrated on primary commodities. But as



Robinson has shown, this is no longer the case. In 1970, 18.5 per cent of the total exports from the developing world were manufactured goods; by 2000, this figure had increased to over 80 per cent (Baker *et al.* 1998: 7; UNCTAD 2002a: 5). On the face of it, this rise of manufacturing should have eroded precisely the kind of spatial subordination identified by some versions of dependency theory. But in fact the picture is more complex than this.

By the end of the 1990s, the 15 fastest-growing exports from developed countries were all in the top 20 of most dynamic and competitive global exports, while only a minority of the fastest growing exports from the developing world were in this category — and in most of these cases (with the partial exception of east Asia), these were concentrated in the labour-intensive, assembly stages of production of these goods (UNCTAD 2002a: 71). Moreover, since the start of the 1980s, while the developed countries' share of manufacturing exports fell (from 82.3 per cent in 1980 to 70.9 per cent by 1997), their share of manufacturing value added *increased* from 64.5 per cent to 73.3 per cent. Over the same period, Latin America's share of world manufacturing exports increased from 1.5 per cent to 3.5 per cent, but its share of manufacturing value added fell from 7.1 per cent to 6.7 per cent (Kozul Wright and Rayment 2004: 14). For developing countries as a whole, manufacturing output's contribution to gross domestic product (GDP) has barely changed since 1960: it stood at 21.5 per cent in 1960, and increased to just 22.7 per cent in 2000. There was significant regional variation: sub-Saharan Africa saw a decline from 15.3 per cent to 14.9 per cent; in West Asia and North Africa it increased from 10.9 per cent to 14.2 per cent; Latin America saw a decline from 28.1 per cent to 17.8 per cent (in the Southern Cone the decline was from 32.2 per cent to 17.3 per cent). In South Asia, manufacturing output's contribution to GDP increased from 13.8 per cent to 15.7 per cent; in East Asia (excluding China) it increased from 14.6 per cent to 27 per cent; and China saw an increase from 23.7 to 34.5 per cent (Kozul Wright and Rayment 2004: 32). By the end of the 1990s, developing countries accounted for only 10 per cent of total world exports of goods with a high component of research and development, technological complexity, and/or scale (UNCTAD 2002a: 56). In many cases, participation in global production networks is negatively correlated with manufacturing value added, while some countries with substantial rates of manufacturing production but low rates of participation in global production networks have higher rates of manufacturing value added (*ibid.*: 78–80). What these data show is that while manufacturing exports have increased for developing countries, most of these exports remain in low-value sectors. Core countries still tend to dominate in high-value sectors, with high barriers to entry, high start up and running costs, and significant skill levels. In the periphery, there are large amounts of surplus labour, and barriers to entry,



skills, and wages are low. While this gives such countries considerable competitive advantages, at the same time the fact that those barriers are low means that competition is particularly intense and largely determined by cost price, which also means low wages (Kaplinsky 2005).

Thus, in contrast to Robinson's arguments, the rise of manufacturing in developing countries has not led to convergence with developed ones. There has been a fall in the share of world trade for Africa and Latin America in recent years, precisely when the globalisation of production has increased. Africa's share declined from 4.1 per cent in 1970 to 1.5 per cent in 1995, and Latin America's from 5.5 per cent to 4.4 per cent over the same period (UNCTAD 1998: 183). In 1960, Africa's share of total merchandise exports was 5.6 per cent, and Latin America's 7.5 per cent; by 2002, Africa's share had declined to 2.1 per cent and Latin America's to 5.4 per cent (UNCTAD 2004: 51). The share increased for Asia, from 8.5 per cent to 21.4 per cent, but this was the region that was most resistant to neoliberal policies, at least until recently. Similarly, foreign investment figures are highly concentrated, with developing countries generally receiving around one-third, to the developed world's two-thirds, of global foreign investment. For example, between 1993 and 1998, 'developed countries' received 61.2 per cent of world foreign direct investment (FDI), developing countries 35.3 per cent, and the former communist European countries 3.5 per cent (UNCTAD 2002b: 3–5). For 1999–2000, foreign investment inflows to the developed world constituted 80 per cent of total FDI, and the proportion going to developing countries constituted only 17.9 per cent of the total (*ibid.*: 5). By 2006, out of a total of 1.3 trillion USD, developed countries received 857 billion USD and developing countries 379 billion USD, with transition (former socialist) economies receiving 69 billion USD (UNCTAD 2007: 2–3). By 2009 developing and transition economies accounted for almost 50 per cent of the total global share of foreign investment inflows, but this reflects less a convergence between developed and developing countries, and more the significant decline in the amount of foreign investment in recent years. The 16 per cent global decline in 2008 was followed by a 37 per cent fall in 2009. What has happened, then, is that the amount going to developing countries has fallen recently; it has just fallen less sharply than has the amount received by developed countries (UNCTAD 2010: 2–3), a trend that has been reversed in previous periods of economic upturns. On the whole, over a 20-year period, we can say that the direction of foreign investment is highly unequal. Developing countries receive around one-third of the global total, and of this third, only a few developing countries receive the lion's share. Indeed, from 1990 to 2005, the top 10 developing country FDI recipients increased their developing country share from 60 to 70 per cent of the total (Rugraff *et al.* 2008: 17).



### **China's rise, the US' 'fall', and global economic crisis**

The globalisation of manufacturing production has thus not ended uneven development in the international economy. This point also has implications for understanding contemporary geo-politics, not least the question of alleged US decline and the rise of China. While the US has massively increased its trade deficit since 1982, this has not necessarily been at the expense of productive capacity. In the period from 1990 up to the outset of global crisis in 2007–2008, the US outgrew its main competitors Japan and Germany, and, despite massive growth in both India and China, its share of global GDP remained constant (Schwartz 2010: 177–8). The internationalisation of capital involving the sub-contracting of lower value, labour-intensive production to the developing world is central to any explanation for the rise of China (Breslin 2007). The shares of multinational company manufacturing affiliates in China's exports increased from 17.4 per cent in 1990 to 55 per cent in 2003, and US multinationals account for a quarter of all exports from China (Hart-Landsberg and Burkett 2005: 125). In addition to direct investment there are a great many sub-contracting agreements between foreign and Chinese firms, in which the latter supplies the former. The US is central to both direct foreign investment and sub-contracting agreements. In 2004, US retail giant Wal-Mart imported 18 billion USD in goods from China, making it the national equivalent of the fifth largest 'national' importer of Chinese goods.

The current economic crisis does not alter this situation, as it is a global crisis of capitalism, and one in which the American state is expected to lead the way — in cooperation with other states — out of that crisis. This can be seen in terms of both the causes and consequences of the crisis. The collapse of the US housing market that was central to the crisis unfolding was internationalised, and its expansion was facilitated in part by capital flows into the US from East Asia, as the latter accumulated foreign exchange reserves to protect itself against a speculative attack on national currencies such as had occurred in the Asian financial crisis of 1997–1998 (Thompson 2010: 9). Inflows of capital kept interest rates low, while East Asian surpluses arose out of the expansion of manufacturing exports into the US market. Financial innovation further allowed for expansion through securitisation of loans, but by 2007, these factors that were central to the boom had all but disappeared. Cheap imports into the US limited the income of low wage earners and so the market for sub-prime mortgages was exhausted; the success of Asian, and especially Chinese industrialisation, led to inflationary pressures as Chinese demand for raw materials, especially oil, soared; interest rates were increased to deal with inflationary pressures; and securitised mortgages, which depended on continued housing market expansion, quickly became toxic (Schwartz 2009: Ch. 7; 2010; Hay 2011). Seen in this way, the crisis is not a simple zero-sum





game between a rising China and a declining US, but rather one where interdependence has serious implications for both states (Hung 2011).

Furthermore, while US national debt stood at 3,076 billion USD in December 2008, this is financed above all by the Asian purchase of US debt, with China accounting for the largest amount (727.4 billion USD in December 2008) of US Treasury securities. A massive cut in domestic consumption by US consumers would hit Chinese exporters hard, and the Chinese economy is highly dependent on exports. The ratio of China's exports to its GDP has rapidly risen from 5 per cent in 1978 to 35 per cent by 2005, and private consumption as a share of GDP fell from around 50 per cent in 1990 to 35 per cent by 2005 (Hung 2009: 98–9). This is very different from other East Asian tigers, who have constantly lower export-GDP ratios and whose private consumption ratio as a share of GDP has been constant at between 50 per cent and 60 per cent since the 1970s. The US is by far the biggest market for Chinese exports. All this suggests not only that there is considerable interdependence between China and the US, but China is highly dependent on exports to the US market. Indeed, in the early days of the global economic crisis, Chinese exports to the US fell, impacting negatively on growth. This was turned around by fiscal stimulus packages by the Chinese government, but serious questions remain as to whether this is leading to unsustainable financial speculation.

Indeed, we can go further and point to the limits of China's rise. For instance, the combined outward direct foreign investment of the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) in 2008 was less than that of Netherlands. China's foreign exchange reserves of 2.3 trillion USD in 2009 might have been the highest in the world, but this amount is actually less than the market capitalisation of the top 10 US firms in the same year (Nolan and Zhang 2010: 101). While it is true that China has branched out into higher tech production, this has been less because of success in national upgrading strategies replicating earlier experiences in Japan and South Korea, and more because of the global restructuring of international capitalism, and the ability of global companies to shed some parts of the production process to distant locations (Steinfeld 2010: 87–92). In other words, it is less because of the rise of a 'Bukharinite' rise of a national bloc of Chinese capital, and more because of the rise of a transnational capitalism identified by Robinson. Furthermore, there is a qualitative difference between the debt the US owes to foreigners and the debt foreigners owe to the US, for 'even though the United States has a considerable net debt to the rest of the world, the world continues to pay its US creditors more money than US debtors pay their global creditors' (Schwartz 2009: 25). This is because US investment is largely in longer-term, higher-revenue ventures such as FDI, while foreigners tend to hold relatively passive US debt such as bonds and mortgage-backed securities (*ibid.*: 41). This has led some observers to claim that China is simply 'playing our game', or acting as the US'



'head servant', as it supplies cheap goods that — alongside increased debt (at least until the financial crash of 2007–08 onwards) — helped to sustain US consumption (Hung 2009; Steinfeld 2010).

This section has argued the global diffusion of capitalism has not eroded hierarchies based on uneven development. This means that some locations continue to dominate other places, and even the rise of China needs to be situated within this wider context. The question we now need to address more explicitly is this: how does this account of structured inequalities in the world economy relate to the question of contemporary imperialism?

### **Neo-liberalism and liberal interventionism**

This section examines liberal intervention and suggests that the structured inequalities identified above have consequences that challenge at least some of the cases made for humanitarian intervention. This section examines liberal interventionism, first through a brief examination of the malign effects of humanitarian interventionism. It then more broadly examines the longer-term consequences — and indeed cases made for such intervention — for the structured hierarchies outlined in the previous section. The argument here is that the main case for intervention is that it will incorporate marginalised rogue and failed states into the liberal international order, but in fact the policies that follow such interventions serve to marginalise such states further.

### **Humanitarian intervention, good intentions, and bad actions**

The basic case for humanitarian intervention is the idea that the rights or happiness of individuals are more important than the sovereignty of nation-states. It was this that provided the rationale for humanitarian intervention in the post-Cold War period (Wheeler 2000). In cases such as Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq, the case for war was made on the basis that the intervention was based on the moral ground that it was based on well-intentioned, rather than self-interested, behaviour by the intervening states (Cushman 2005), and that the consequences of the intervention were more desirable than that of non-intervention. In terms of the immediate impact of military intervention, the case for war tended to fall back on a caricatured neo-Kantianism, in which the good intentions of those that intervened were highlighted (Cushman 2005: 19; Scruton 2005). Kant (1957: 7, 8) himself actually argued that one must first observe moral laws for their own sake and apply them to oneself before judging others, and that 'no state shall by force interfere with the constitution or government of another state ... regardless of



circumstance'. His argument rested on his concern that such actions violate the very claims made for a higher political order in the first place.

In contrast, Robert Cooper (2002) has argued that the world can be divided into three kinds of states. Post-modern states are basically advanced liberal democracies, committed to peace and compromise and beyond the power politics of the old state system. Modern states, such as China, are relatively stable but are still committed to competitive expansion. Finally, pre-modern states are failed states and sources of instability. It is the duty of the post-modern states to be 'cosmopolitan imperialists' and intervene in the pre-modern states in order to preserve order, even if this means the promotion of double standards and colonial power. Thus, Thomas Barnett (2005: 56) argues that the world can be divided into a globalising Core and a 'Non-Integrating Gap', and it is the job of the former to eliminate the latter through promoting global interconnectedness — if necessary by military intervention.

These kinds of arguments — that the liberal core should exercise double standards and power — over the pre-modern, non-integrating gap, echo John Stuart Mill's case for colonialism in the 19th century. For Mill, membership of the international society of states was conditional, and based on the idea that only some nations or cultures were capable of exercising reciprocity, conforming to international law, or exercising tolerance (Sullivan 1983; Pitts 2007: 71–6). For Mill (1984: 121), '[t]o suppose that the same international customs, and the same rules of international morality, can obtain between one civilized nation and another, and between civilized nations and barbarians, is a grave error, and one which no statesman can fall into'. This was because 'the rules of ordinary international morality imply reciprocity. But barbarians will not reciprocate' (*ibid.*). Moreover, 'nations which are still barbarous have not got beyond the period during which it is likely to be for their benefit that they should be conquered and held in subjection by foreigners' (*ibid.*). This division between the civilised and the barbarian may not be made explicit in these post-colonial times, but the notion that the western liberal democracies can save the world from rogue and failed states is most certainly alive and well (Duffield 2005). And given this self-regarding notion that western liberal democracies can and should save the world, it is seen as self-evident that they have good intentions.

Indeed, the case for humanitarian intervention then moves on to the position that, not only are good intentions self-evident, but these are sufficient to justify both bad actions and unforeseen consequences. But this argument too easily relies on the separation of intention from action, with the result that undesirable actions — torture, collateral damage and many 'small massacres' — are supposedly excused by liberal good intentions (Runciman 2005; Shaw 2005; Keen 2006). Weber's (1984: 360) distinction between an ethics of responsibility and an ethics of principled conviction is relevant here, as the former 'does not



feel that he can shuffle off the consequences of his own actions, as far as he could foresee them', while for the latter, '[i]f evil consequences flow from an action done out of pure conviction, this type of person holds the world, not the doer, responsible'. In other words, if unexpected — and violent — consequences occur as a result of the good intentions of the liberal imperialist, these cannot be the fault of the liberal, because the good intentions supposedly trump the unforeseen consequences. As well as propagating the dangerously circular argument that good intentions self-evidently excuse bad actions, and this must be so as the bad actions are unexpected consequences of good intentions, this approach betrays a poor understanding of political reality. The expectation is that intervention will be followed by a peaceful liberal politics, but this optimism abstracts completely from the violent conflict that has accompanied all processes of capitalist development.

### **Humanitarian intervention and global hierarchy: the political economy of liberal intervention**

Moreover, the idea of integrating so-called pre-modern, barbarian states into a post-modern, civilised, liberal order is problematic. It is envisaged by contemporary liberal imperialists that military action will be followed by neo-liberal policies and aid, designed to integrate countries into the global economy. Military intervention is thus justified on the grounds that it will rid the world of rogue or failed states, and put in place institutions and policies designed to promote economic growth and alleviate poverty. This essentially mirrors the neo-liberal agenda promoting good governance combined with market-friendly policies of privatisation and liberalisation. In this sense, we can see contemporary 'military humanitarianism' as a form of structural adjustment, predicated on the belief that the poverty that exists in failed and rogue states stems from the failure of these same states to choose globalisation-friendly policies (NSS 2002). In this context of globalising market expansion, liberal democracy is regarded as the best government, partly because it can facilitate market expansion, but also because it is associated with government that is neither authoritarian nor dictatorial.

Humanitarian intervention is thus based in part on the belief that globalisation is good for development and the poor. This is a common argument in mainstream development thinking. The 2002 World Bank report *Globalization, Growth and Poverty* suggests that the era of globalisation has been associated with poverty reduction, which has been caused by economic growth and this in turn has occurred because of the liberalisation policies of some states in the developing world. Many claims have been made that the number of people living in absolute poverty has declined over recent years; these claims range from a reduction from 1.8 billion in 1990 to 1.37 billion in



2005; a decline from 1.4 billion in 1980 to 1.2 billion, 1 billion, or even lower in 1980 (World Bank 2002: 30; Chen and Ravallion 2004; Bhalla 2010). The clear implication is that poverty is a result of insufficient globalisation, and this ‘insufficiency’ can be reversed by liberal policies, — or imposed after military intervention. For Giddens (2002: 73), low income countries are poor because they are ‘insufficiently globalized’.

But these arguments discount from the outset the idea that ‘actually existing globalisation’ is intrinsically hierarchical, leading to concentration in some areas and marginalisation elsewhere. On poverty reduction, there are strong grounds for questioning the view that absolute poverty has fallen (Reddy and Pogge 2003; Wade 2004a), and the Bank’s own *World Development Report* on 1999/2000 suggested that absolute poverty had increased from 1.2 billion in 1987 to 1.5 billion in 1999 (World Bank 1999: 25). Furthermore, if the poverty head-count is switched from 1 USD to 2 USD a day, a more realistic figure, then even the Bank’s own problematic figures look less promising, for the number in this category *increased* from 1981 to 2001, from 2.45 to 2.74 billion, a 12 per cent increase. Moreover, the assumption that the poor can simply be lifted out of poverty by economic growth, common in popular books like Paul Collier’s *The Bottom Billion* (2008), can be challenged. On the basis of World Bank data, Sumner (2010) estimates that in 1990, 93 per cent of the world’s poor lived in low income countries (that is, the very poorest countries), but by 2007–2008, 75 per cent of the world’s poor lived in middle income countries (the next category of poor countries).

But more relevant is the fallacious assumption that poverty reduction has taken place because of globalisation-friendly policies (see Wade 2004a, b; Kiely 2007). The World Bank’s own data suggest that if we measure openness by trade and investment policies, allegedly more liberal economies had higher average tariffs (35 per cent) than low globalisers (20 per cent) (Sumner 2005: 1,174). The IMF index of trade restrictiveness measures trade policy by quantifying average tariff rates and non-tariff barriers, and there is no evidence of greater trade restrictiveness on the part of the poorest countries (Sumner 2005: 1,174). James Ferguson (2006: 14) rightly suggests that for Africa, its participation in globalisation ‘has certainly not been a matter simply of “joining the world economy”; perversely, it has instead been a matter of highly selective and spatially encapsulated forms of global connection combined with widespread disconnection and exclusion’. In other words, rather than theorising in terms of countries being sufficiently or insufficiently globalised, we need to better understand the forms of global integration, and how these are unequally structured, as the previous section argued.

And here we come to the heart of the problem, because for later developers, *neo-liberalism actually subordinates or even marginalises ‘non-integrators’ rather than integrating them*. The effect of neo-liberalism — in both its economic and



military forms — is to marginalise through facilitating a growing concentration of capital, a related unequal distribution of income, and comparatively slow rates of economic growth (at least compared to the Bretton Woods era). This does not of course mean that the hierarchies generated by international capitalism can, on their own, serve as full explanations for state failure, and this will also depend on domestic and geopolitical factors as well as economic ones. Mainstream understandings of failed states assume that liberalisation policies are effective remedies for failure, as globalisation constitutes an opportunity for developing countries. But our discussion suggests something quite different, namely that the structured hierarchies in the global political economy mean that there are serious constraints that can serve to reinforce failure (Wade 2005). Moreover, insofar as opportunities are generated through liberalisation, these can sometimes directly lead to practices that reinforce domestic failure. For instance, while the international financial institutions praised the sound macroeconomic policies of the government in Sierra Leone in the 1990s, war was exacerbated by state cutbacks, which led to wage cuts for soldiers and an increase in smuggling, extortion, and illegal mining (Keen 2005). More generally, successful processes of capitalist development have taken place through states deliberately protecting themselves from import competition from established producers, via a process of import-substituting industrialisation and export-oriented incentives (Chang 2002; Reinert 2007). In the context of the neo-liberal free trade, upgrading is far from inevitable and indeed, faced with import competition from established overseas producers, is even unlikely.

These kinds of processes occur both within and between countries, and the use of military power should be seen in this light. One does not have to accept a functionalist analysis in order to identify the ways in which military power functions in a neo-liberal age, for it essentially serves to police the marginalised. Put bluntly, and to make the link between globalisation and imperialism more explicit, *neo-liberalism is imperialism*, whether through military or economic means, or indeed both. It is here that we can link both the strength of the state and the extension of the market, not only in terms of the use of market-expanding regulations, but also in the expansion of what Bourdieu (1999) calls the state's 'right hand'. This essentially refers to the repressive power of the state, and specifically its role in policing those marginalised by neo-liberalism. And this is not only a case of the powerful states policing failed states in the international order (Roberts *et al.* 2003), but of these same states policing 'failed' domestic populations that have not been integrated into the domestic order (Wacquant 2009). There is thus a close parallel between the war on terror, the war on drugs, and the war on crime (Graham 2010), for the marginalised in both cities and states pose 'unique problems of imperial order and social control that conventional politics has barely begun to register' (Davis 2004: 15).



Seen in this way, globalisation is a useful historical description of recent changes in the international order, but it is not something that integrates all countries or places or equalises the conditions of accumulation. In its current neo-liberal form, globalisation is imperialist as it marginalises some places in the international order.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to assess critically the extent to which globalisation or imperialism, as concepts, best ‘capture’ the nature of the current international order. First, globalisation has no status as theoretical explanation; Rosenberg’s post-mortem of globalisation as theory is totally convincing. Second, on the other hand, and *contra* Rosenberg, globalisation carries some considerable weight as description of changes in the international order since 1945, and especially since the 1980s and 1990s. These include the US-led promotion of a liberal international order, the internationalisation of the state, and above all the internationalisation of capital and the associated rise of global production networks and financialisation, which call into question any straightforward association of capital with nation-states. Seen in this way, and contrary to Rosenberg, a case can be made that globalisation represents the fourth major conjuncture of the capitalist epoch, beyond the era of classical imperialism. In terms of imperialism, while conflict and competition exist between the US and other states, the argument that this is more significant than cooperation is neither empirically nor theoretically sustainable, and ‘globalisation’ as empirical description goes some way towards showing why this is the case. In terms of theoretical explanation then, the article has particularly questioned the extent to which uneven and combined development can be used to explain geopolitical conflict between powers — in other words, uneven and combined development has limited utility in characterising the *international state system*. However, third and finally, none of this means that imperialism is dead. The globalisation of manufacturing production has not eroded hierarchies in the international order, and this reflects the uneven development of the *international capitalist system*. Moreover, these hierarchies and their reproduction and maintenance are a central feature of neo-liberal globalisation, and liberal forms of intervention should be assessed in part in terms of understanding this wider context. In this way, the concept of imperialism thus remains relevant for understanding the current international order.

This is not to say that nothing can be learned from older historical accounts. However, rather than defend the Marxist classics today, more can be learnt through a critical engagement with the case made for British hegemony, free

trade and liberal imperialism by John Stuart Mill, and the problems associated with this political project. This is also central to understanding neo-liberal geo-politics and the contradictory role of liberal intervention in an uneven, hierarchical, and imperialist international order.

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