

Imperialism, Property, and the Privatisation of Knowledge*

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Two Marxist streams of critique have been claiming priority in an attempt to elucidate capitalist imperialism. One insists that national states are vital to capital and emphasises the concrete physical boundaries upon which capital must rely. The other asserts the notion of a transnational capitalist class (and institutions), underscoring the non-committed dimension of capital vis-à-vis national borders, as it flows unrestrained, indiscriminately, and transnationally, moving large masses of capital. This paper claims the answer lies in a synthesis of both positions. The concrete example used here is situated within the most crucial category of human production and reproduction, namely property, for property reveals the most essential practical character of any social arrangement based on appropriation. In this sense, I propose an understanding of both the peculiarity of property under capitalist relations and its recently ongoing transformation with the ubiquitous rise and proliferation of intellectual property_(private). Historically, property totality underwent a significant cleavage. As imperialism's mass of capital increased and the social gains diminished the capacity to sustain the rate of exploitation, a tendency towards lower profit rates pushed capitalist centres to export capital to the peripheries, ending the everlasting process of pure extraction of raw materials. A robust mechanism was required to control this process; property totality was divided into private property and intellectual property_(private) of the means of production. However, this process, by enabling further extraction of surplus-value, created two additional problems. The very capitalist core became dependent on the peripheries, and the capacity to innovate and increase productivity was jeopardised by the paradoxical privatisation of knowledge. In this sense, each step that capitalist imperialism has taken to prolong its existence has also promoted fundamental transformations that are accelerating its decay.

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Imperialism; Capitalism; Private Property; Knowledge; Intellectual Private Property.

1. *Introduction*

In this paper, I try to connect capitalist imperialism to *intellectual property*_(private). First, I distinguish between two notions of how and where capitalist power is located, namely the idea of the nation-state on the one hand and a competing conception of transnational capital on the other. I suggest that the answer lies in a combination of both, rather than in the traditional non-dialectical hierarchisation. Next, I turn to the question of property, since the ways society and individuals appropriate the means of life directly shape the contours of social relations. In this sense, I do not postulate capitalism as the metamorphosis of mercantilism; instead, I understand it as a particular historical form of social property relations¹. Finally, I propose analysing not only capitalist property in general but also its impact on intellectual appropriation. A brief example of the contemporary tensions between the United States and China is explored in order to give representation to the practical effects of this specific struggle for intellectual resources.

2. *Capitalist Imperialism*

In the same way Karl Marx showed that capitalism is not the culmination of commodities, it is also not the culmination of imperialism; however, as Marx showed, analogous to commodities becoming universal and pervasive, thus acquiring a new quality, with the emergence and universalisation of capitalism², so did imperialism attain a new character, as it was subsumed under the capitalist mode of production. In this regard, early works on imperialism were absolutely essential – such as those of John Atkinson Hobson, who identified not only the parasitic element of

¹ Not to be misunderstood as mere legal relations and establishing of laws.

² MARX 1962.

imperialism but also its relation to finance, to Vladimir Lenin, who sharply criticised Kautsky for universalising British imperialism based on industrial capital without taking notice of the competition among them, thus fetishising economic arrangements without taking into account the political dimension³. However, as capitalism further evolved, theories have been presenting additional elements that may help deepen the understanding of capitalist imperialism and, thus, enriching Lenin's analysis that concludes that «imperialism is the monopolistic stage of capitalism» chiefly derived from five pillars: first, the «concentration of production and capital»; second, «the fusion of banking capital with industrial capital and the emergence of a financial oligarchy on the basis of this “finance capital”»; third, the increased relevance of «the export of capital» which differs from the export of goods; fourth, the formation of «international monopolistic associations of capitalists» who «divide the world among themselves»; and lastly, the conclusion of «the territorial division of the earth among the great capitalist powers»⁴.

Over the last one hundred years, not only has capital become more concentrated, but political hegemonic power, which was previously divided among European powers, has since 1945 been concentrated in the United States. Moreover, these two synergies seem to converge further, as the increasing complexities at both political and economic levels have imposed capitalist imperatives over the very capitalist elites, which require the state apparatus of violence, mediatic control, surveillance, etc., to sustain and guarantee the capitalist mode of production and appropriation. In this sense, how does the state apparatus based on the nation-state relate to capital's appetite for expansion beyond any natural or artificial borders?

While I was watching Radhika Desai's talk for the *Institute for the Critical Study of Society* concerning the topic of contemporary world transformation, especially the two opposite paradigms of NATO and BRICS, one particular element caught my attention during the Q&A. When asked about the transnational capitalist class (TCC), Desai said: «I

³ HOBSON 1902; LENIN 1971.

⁴ LENIN 1971, p. 271f.

do disagree [...] that there's a transnational capitalist class»⁵ and emphasised different economic and political aspects to sustain her thesis. Although I already knew Desai's theoretical endeavours and political stance, this point lingered in my mind.

Interestingly, it seems that, today, at least two influential camps of Marxist thinkers problematise this issue. Even more interestingly, I not only see their merits but consider both to be simultaneously correct instead of mutually exclusive. Consequently, I posed the following question to myself: *Is there a hierarchical superiority of one form over the other, or maybe just an ontological priority?* While these two Marxist streams of analysis suggest the former over the latter, this paper, however, claims, as an adjacent thesis, the ontological priority to be more consistent with material reality. In this sense, my hypothesis is neither to isolate capitalist classes within nation-states nor to supersede them altogether as a totalising transnational class, but to recognise their indissoluble dialectical character. Of course, I do not have the pretension to exhaust this highly complex discussion within a few lines; nevertheless, I do consider it essential to shed some light on it as a basis to consider capitalist imperialism.

While I cannot claim that it was Kees van der Pijl who started the notion of a transnational capitalist class (TCC), his 1984 analysis of *The Making of an Atlantic Class* definitely played a vital role in rendering it more tenable. While he emphasises imperial unity as a reaction to the structural crisis, thereby fostering economic and political cohesion, he does not fetishise it altogether; instead, this solidification is accompanied by an acknowledgement of unilateralism and rivalry. Historically, unity among capitalist societies has emerged as a capitalist compromise in order to combat real socialism⁶.

Beyond Leslie Sklair's emphasis on the ideological elements that bind corporate executives together, William K Carroll suggests «that these corporate leaders really form a transnational community that operates in such a way as to warrant the term transnational class in the structural

⁵ DESAI 2024.

⁶ PIJL 2012.

sense»⁷. He claims this occurs by means of «longitudinal interlocks». The notion of a North Atlantic Class appears in networks of interlocking directorates among corporations. By the end of the 1970s, Samir Amin claimed that «monopoly capitalism was entering a new age, characterized by the gradual—but rapid—dismantling of national production systems»⁸. Furthermore, the shift of capitalist production to the outskirts of the capitalist core fosters a new balance between managerial and intensive labour. Lastly, the internationalisation of finance further nurtured rentier instead of productive strategies.

Finally, William I. Robinson has recurrently highlighted not only the move of productive capital towards militarisation, but additionally how it entails two other crucial characteristics, namely the militarisation of police apparatuses (and its normalisation in everyday life) as well as the privatisation of militarism beyond national frameworks.

This is extremely important. While Gramsci noted, at the beginning of the 20th century, that «[c]oercion has therefore to be ingeniously combined with persuasion and consent»⁹, as capitalism loses its dynamism, alternatives to sustain its hegemonic form from within appear utterly impossible; thus, securing the appropriation of surplus-value becomes increasingly more dependent on extra-economic powers. Military spending and activities are at the forefront because they simultaneously enable an infrastructure of social control when ideological control does not suffice anymore. In this sense, Gramsci's statement must be updated to contemporary conditions: «Persuasion and consent have therefore to be relentlessly combined with coercion».

In a polemic with Ellen Meiksins Wood, Robinson suggests that Wood's work on imperialism is based on «nation-state-centrism [which] leads us down a path that inevitably employs reified categories, and substitutes Marxist class analysis with Weberian state analysis»¹⁰. Leaning on

⁷ CARROLL 2010, p. 19.

⁸ AMIN 2019.

⁹ GRAMSCI 1971, p. 310.

¹⁰ ROBINSON 2007, p. 84.

her methodological interpretation of capitalist relations based on exclusive private property of the means of production¹¹, Wood is unapologetic in her reply to Robinson and other critics. She emphasises she takes seriously «the transnationalisation of markets and capital» and «the idea that national states are compelled to adapt to the requirements of transnational capital»; however, she rejects the «conventional conceptions of globalisation, which involve indefensible assumptions about the inverse relation between a globalised economy and the importance of the territorial state»¹². In this sense, she conceives the nation-state as a condition of capital that must entail a hierarchical superiority over transnational capitalist organisation.

In her book *Capitalism, Coronavirus and War*, with the recognition of the vital drive of wars in the capitalist process of accumulation, especially under contemporary conditions of decades-long downfall of profit rate, Desai would appear to agree with Robinson's assessment. However, by studying her book, this conclusion must soon vanish.

«Just as the dominant ideas in a society are the ideas of the ruling classes in which their special interests are tricked out in the garb of general social interests, so at the international level, the dominant ideas are the ideas of the ruling classes of the dominant nations in which their special interests are articulated as those of the countries they dominate».

To which she adds: «Such ideas dissimulate the critical role all states have played in the economic advance of the dominant nations.» In this sense, the notion of a TCC is dismissed by stressing the insurmountable role of the nation-state. «So, given capitalism's uneven development and formative reliance on states, the capitalist world is necessarily composed of many nations and, equally necessarily, they either compete with one another as nationally organised blocks of capital, particularly in its monopoly phase, or are locked in struggles of domination and subordination»¹³.

¹¹ WOOD 2003, 2017.

¹² WOOD 2007, p. 154.

¹³ DESAI 2023, p. 63.

In his thorough analysis of the state, drawing upon the lines of superseding state domination, István Mészáros – who became a crucial theoretical figure for Hugo Chavez and the Venezuelan Bolivarian revolutionary actualisation beyond imperialism – completely rejects a totalising [transnational] capitalist state: «For the unpalatable truth is that there cannot be a state of the capital system as a whole, because the state can only be structurally entrenched and hierarchically dominant Leviathan state in confrontation not only with its own subordinate social class, but also with some other Leviathan state»¹⁴.

Despite the complexity of all these approaches and the fact that they are all based on Marxism, the insistence on a hierarchical superiority of one mode of power over the other – whether national or transnational – entails an inflexibility that conflicts with Marxian methodology – at least if taken from the perspective of the ontology of the social-being¹⁵. In his critique of the ontology of the absolute spirit, György Lukács demonstrates the vital difference between the two approaches¹⁶. While the ontology of the absolute spirit is also dialectical, for it intrinsically contains motion, the fact that the idea is absolute, that is, «the concept is absolute»¹⁷, introduces an insuperable rigidity, giving rise to a hierarchical superiority of one form over the other. Marx's dialectical materialism supersedes Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's idealist approach in many ways, but one crucial aspect must be underscored, namely, the dialectics of result and premise¹⁸. In this sense, while the nation-state was and still is a premise of capitalist relations, the capitalist drive for expansion exerts constant pressure to break free from national boundaries, imposing new conditions on the nation-state. These two elements developed both in tandem with and in contradiction to one another. To impose a hierarchy, therefore, is an idealisation. While it is true that there is a network of global control¹⁹ in which capitalist control and influence are played out

¹⁴ MÉSZÁROS 2022, p. 51.

¹⁵ ROMEIRO HERMETO 2020.

¹⁶ LUKÁCS 1984, 1986.

¹⁷ HEGEL 1986, p. 16.

¹⁸ ROMEIRO HERMETO 2024.

¹⁹ VITALI ET AL. 2011.

by means of the power of corporations and transnational institutions (such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, NATO, the United Nations, the G7, the World Economic Forum, etc.)²⁰, it is equally true that these networks are strongly dependent on and based in geographical locations of capital²¹ within national borders.

In a word, to guarantee the surplus appropriation and accumulation of the global few, both the nation-state and its institutions, on the one hand, and transnational allegiance and its institutions, on the other, reinforce each other despite the intraclass contradictions among capitalist sectors, elite paid actors (capitalists, government officials, institutional representants, intelligentsia), nations, institutions, etc. The antagonistic dialectics of nation-states and the formation of transnational capitalist hegemony also reveal a crucial aspect of ruling-class ideology. While conflicts among themselves remain unresolved and tensioned because of the very *raison d'être* of the relationship between capital and nation-state, it must be recognised that ruling classes wage a world war against all peoples and identify anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist Marxism, socialism, and communism as their primary antagonistic contradiction, thus enabling intra- and interclass cohesion.

Finally, an additional aspect that must be highlighted is the difference between British and US-American imperialism. While analyses of the early 20th century saw Britain as the new imperialism²², it did not represent the realised subsumption of empire under the capitalist mode of production. The distinction Ellen Meiksins Wood draws provides a more nuanced perspective that helps clarify the uniqueness not of the British but of the US-American empire. Before the United States became a global empire, imperialism, including that of Britain, was still primarily based on politically constituted property; that is, most surplus-labour was extracted by means of extra-economic power. Thus, political-military control or settlements played an essential role in enabling the appropriation of surplus-labour. Despite the US-American empire using its military might in order to destabilise and control foreign peoples, it lacks a clear

²⁰ PHILLIPS 2018; STIGLITZ 2002.

²¹ VITALI — BATTISTON 2014.

²² HOBSON 1902.

goal, nor is it constrained by competing empires. Under these peculiar conditions, it operates like a global police, and its wars are, in reality, open-ended conflicts. This extra-economic power, however, is not the means of surplus-value appropriation but rather a tool for capitalism to impose the economic imperatives based on exclusive private property and markets as a compulsion to access the means of life.²³

However, Wood and Desai consider the US-American vassals in Europe and Asia to be sovereign countries on the basis that while Britain and the United States gave up production, Japan and Germany remained industrial powers²⁴. This is only half true. First, one must take into account that the Japanese and German industrial base, destroyed during World War II, was not followed by sanctions or constraints; instead, their industries and societies were fostered by the United States as strategic posts of containment of communism. Second, since 1945, both countries (but also others like Italy) have been, to this day, occupied by the US-American military. Third, although classical industry has been hollowed out in the United States, with the exception of countries such as China²⁵ and North Korea, the US digital technology industry completely colonises the capitalist infrastructure and the bourgeois mindset of countries worldwide, including former capitalist empires. What are the alternatives to Alphabet's products (Google, YouTube, Gmail, etc.), to Microsoft's

²³ WOOD 2003. Domenico Losurdo emphasised in multiple occasions how the United States acts as if they attributed to themselves the role of the world police/sheriff (LOSURDO 1993, p. 272f).

Ruy Mauro Marini brilliantly shows how this compulsion operates differently from the perspective of the Third World, where enduring super-exploitation persists in low-value export-based economies. That is, for the Global South, production and consumption are not in antagonistic contradiction precisely because they do not represent a totality; consumption does not actualise surplus-value since it occurs overseas (MARINI 2022, p. 139ff).

²⁴ DESAI 2023.

²⁵ Chinese rapid and apparently unstoppable development in technology is gradually changing this dynamic. In multiple sectors, it has already taken the lead, e.g., electric vehicles, new energy vehicles, photovoltaic technology, battery technology, new nuclear technology, etc. Assessment by the US Government recognises Chinese groundbreaking achievements (BLAUGHER ET AL. 2025).

Windows and Microsoft Office, to Meta's Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram, to NVIDIA's AI chips, etc.?

And if this was not proof enough of their lack of sovereignty, recent events definitely confirm their status as vassals at best. Responding to journalists, the US-American President John Biden affirmed in front of the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz that the United States would put an end to Nord Stream, which was Germany's source of energy for its industrial base, in case Russia reacted to NATO's provocations and the killings of ethnic Russians by its proxy (Ukraine); with the start of the Russian Special Military operation, according to Seymour Hersh, the United States blew up Nord Stream not only cutting Germany's essential energy supply but committing the greatest eco-terrorist act in history as well as an act of war against the European vassals.²⁶

In Japan, internal and external tensions are building up, not over Japanese interests but US-American ones. A remarkable example of internal tension is the continuous US-American occupation of Okinawa, which began in 1945. Back then, the United States established a military government –the United States Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Islands (USCAR) – that formally ended in 1972. However, after Japan reestablished sovereignty over Okinawa, the United States maintained its troops stationed there to prevent the so-called communist threat. With the end of the Cold War, like NATO, the US-American occupation should have ended, and yet, like NATO, it was sustained. In 1995, after three US-American servicemen captured and raped a twelve-year-old schoolgirl, massive local protests still did not succeed in removing the occupying

²⁶ HERSH 2023a, 2023b, 2023c. In January 2026, Belgian Prime Minister Bart De Wever publicly reiterated during the World Economic Forum that «Being a happy vassal is one thing. Being a miserable slave is something else», as the United States threatened to invade and occupy Greenland (MOLLER-NIELSEN 2026). At the same time, the United States has shown unwavering support for Israel to commit a genocide in occupied Palestine, at the same time, the United States kidnapped Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, at the same time, the United States waging a worldwide economic war, etc., the only moment Europe has manifested itself contrary to the US empire was when it threatened taking land from its «happy vassal[s]».

power; instead, not only was their presence maintained, but the crimes perpetrated increased²⁷. In 2011, as the Chinese socialist mode of production was already outcompeting the US-American capital, Barack Obama began the Pivot to Asia, increasing military hostilities towards China and moving a significant part of the US-American military's hardware from Western Asia to East Asia in an attempt to encircle and contain China²⁸. Besides its role as a US-American military base, Japan is being dragged by the United States into a potential military conflict with China, building missiles capable of striking China and fostering a diplomatic crisis with potential for enormous escalation.²⁹

Ultimately, one could simply ask: What role does US capitalist imperialism play in determining and sustaining its Western allies? What impact do international institutions such as NATO, the IMF, the World Bank, the G7, etc., have on these nations? In what ways are Japan, Germany, and other countries sovereign when it comes to the military, financial infrastructure and architecture, energy, raw materials, supply chains, and even culture?

3. Property and the Privatisation of Knowledge

If the peculiarity of US-American imperialism is based on a different social property relation from that of the former British counterpart, it is crucial to explore this nuance in order to understand how it affects the privatisation of knowledge.

Following Marx's understanding of the capitalist mode of production, it becomes obvious that its peculiarity is neither the existence of markets nor commodities but is determined by a crucial change in social property relations. Marx states that labour becomes a commodity whose owner,

²⁷ INOUE 2007.

²⁸ BECKER 2023.

²⁹ KELLY — MURAKAMI 2022; WONG 2023. Recently, «Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi sparked a diplomatic spat with China over remarks last week that a hypothetical Chinese attack on democratically-ruled Taiwan could trigger a military response from Tokyo» (GEDDIE ET AL. 2025).

the worker, must sell it to capital, and rhetorically asks, but why? «Um zu leben», that is, *to live*! Labour, which is the worker's «life activity», «his own life expression», is sold to a third person in order to secure the essential means of life, thus converting his life activity into a «means» to enable existence. «He works to live», repeats Marx³⁰. The process through which this happens represents an essential transformation in social property relations, namely the expropriation of the people, the transformation of common property into [exclusive] private property, «the expropriation of the immediate producer, that is, the dissolution of the private property based on his own labour»³¹. In this sense, Marx differentiates between the exclusive private property of the means of production and the «private property of the worker of his own means of production»³². But the «destruction» of the mode of production of small producers represents «the transformation of the individual and divided means of production into one which is socially concentrated, therefore, of the dwarf like property of many in massive property of the few»³³. In this sense, Marx evokes Hegel's teaching on the dialectics of quantity and quality³⁴ to grasp this crucial transformation. Thus, an irrevocable antagonistic contradiction emerges, for capital agglomerates workers together, producing cooperation and transcending individual and atomistic production, and yet the means of production and the product yielded from it are separated from producers; in other words, production becomes exceptionally social, appropriation exclusively private³⁵.

Based on this understanding, Ellen Meiksins Wood first underscores that many societies prior to capitalism were based on politically constituted property; that is, by means of state power, the military, taxation,

³⁰ MARX 1961, p. 400.

³¹ MARX 1962, pp. 756, 789.

³² IDEM, p. 789.

³³ IDEM, p. 790.

³⁴ HEGEL 1989.

³⁵ MARX 1962, p. 791.

traditions, and other mechanisms, elites managed to privately appropriate surplus-labour³⁶. Thus, former private property entailed a significantly different connotation than today's understanding – both the vulgar notion of personal property as private property and exclusive private property of the means of production, simply called private property. Second, only with the process of expropriation and appropriation of land was the politically constituted property superseded by exclusive private property. «The concentration of landed property in England meant that land was worked to an unusual extent by tenants – increasingly on economic rents subject to market conditions – while landlords without access to politically constituted property came to depend on the productive and competitive success of their tenants»³⁷. The character of private property drastically changed, as Marxian dialectics of quantity and quality had anticipated. Therefore, rents, the British aristocracy, and agriculture initiated the capitalist mode of production.³⁸

In this sense, assessments that conflate mercantilism with capitalism, naturalising and metaphysically teleologising capitalist origin as the offspring in germinal market relations just waiting to blossom³⁹, must assume what they need to explain. Instead of being explained as a historical product, capitalism just appears timeless.⁴⁰ On the other hand, some analyses even suggest that capitalism has, in fact, already ended because the contemporary emphasis on social property relations based on *rent*,

³⁶ WOOD 2022.

³⁷ Ivi, p. 251.

³⁸ Unlike the vulgar notion that equates the transformation in property relations with legislative changes, in real history, laws are mostly modified a posteriori, when the new social property relations are already in motion and start to become dominant through economic, military, political, religious, and/or moral means. This by no means subtracts the social relevance of the juridical dimension but rather simply refutes the idea that legal practice in particular would be identical to social property relations in general, instead it is one among many dimensions that composes the totality of social appropriation.

³⁹ WOOD 2017.

⁴⁰ This is also broadly present among Marxists and among exponent thinkers from the Global South, such as Florestan Fernandes and Celso Furtado (FERNANDES 2009; FURTADO 2007).

now extracted by means of *intellectual property*_(private) or unpaid labour from digital prosumers, essentially represents the re-feudalisation of societies.⁴¹ And yet, as mentioned, both Marx and Wood showed precisely that it was *rent* that catapulted capitalism into existence; thus, Durand and Varoufakis essentialise a specific social relation as if it could represent a truth in-itself. As with *money* that can be objectified in shells, livestock, slaves, metals, papers, etc. and represents a means of exchange, treasure, capital, etc., so *rent* cannot contain a metaphysical essence; therefore, conflating its abstract general form with feudalism simply renders any understanding of (both) capitalism (and feudalism) opaque. Moreover, Durand and Varoufakis completely ignore Lenin's analysis of imperialism, which clearly shows the parasitic process of monopolist rent extraction not as something foreign to capital but precisely as the culmination of capitalist competition into the immanent tendency towards monopolisation⁴².

Unlike former empires, the US-American empire represents neither a colonial power nor directly extracts taxes and other forms of wealth; in-itself, it appears not to have any objective; it acts, thus, as a world police, constantly attacking those daring to stand up against it or simply non-aligned to the interest of Western capital. The compulsions enabling surplus-value extraction are economic, unlike former imperialist forms, hence impersonal and obscure. By means of the so-called free trade, imperialism represents economic rather than political domination. Extra-economic dimensions of politics, military, legal, and cultural powers are vital elements, making up an entire infrastructure of capitalist-imperialist domination, but in-themselves are not the means of surplus-value appropriation. These elements provide a degree of stabilisation without which the anarchic power of capital cannot operate⁴³.

However, the very weaponisation of exporting US-American capital in order to secure both surplus-value extraction and an extensive degree of containment of real socialism has transformed those new imperialist

⁴¹ DURAND 2020; VAROUFAKIS 2023. I dealt with this problem elsewhere (RO-MEIRO HERMETO 2025).

⁴² LENIN 1971.

⁴³ WOOD 2003.

conditions. While production was first exported within the capitalist core, namely to the vassals in Western Europe and Japan, the subsequent move exporting production to the capitalist peripheries created an entirely new problem, because, while previously, dependency occurred dialectically in the sense that as capitalist peripheries depended on the capitalist core to have access to industrialised good but, simultaneously, the power of the capitalist core was contingent on cheaply accessing raw materials from the peripheries⁴⁴; now, some Global South actors possessed – but not owned – the raw materials, the production, and the know-how, thus maintaining a relationship of domination became considerably unsustainable were capitalist logic to be preserved⁴⁵. Already in 1974, fifteen years before the Soviet Union collapsed, the United States passed a trade act «that include[d] the Jackson–Vanik Amendment linking trade to intellectual property»⁴⁶. This was crucial because, for the next twenty years, the United States and key members of the Global North negotiated the privatisation of knowledge, which materialised in 1994 with the TRIPS agreement, after over 100 years of failed attempts by imperialist colonial powers⁴⁷. However, this was not an autonomous, ad hoc state intervention but rather the product of enormous lobbying power by private capital – «an ad hoc coalition of 13 major US corporations: Bristol-Myers, DuPont, FMC Corporation, General Electric, General Motors, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Johnson & Johnson, Merck, Monsanto, Pfizer, Rockwell International and Warner Communications»⁴⁸.

The act of appropriation for production, which historically had constituted – what I call – a property totality, was now split. The means of production, which were already separated from producers, were divided into exclusive private property, on the one hand, and *intellectual property*_(private), on the other. This established a unique situation; conceiving the former as physical or tangible and the latter as metaphysical and intangible is an illusion; in reality, they simply represent different modes of

⁴⁴ FERNANDES 2009; MARINI 2022.

⁴⁵ DESAI 2023; ROMEIRO HERMETO 2024.

⁴⁶ DRAHOS — BRAITHWAITE 2002, p. xi.

⁴⁷ ROMEIRO HERMETO 2024, 2025b.

⁴⁸ DRAHOS — BRAITHWAITE 2002, p. 118.

materiality⁴⁹. Under the synthetic condition, Western capital could indiscriminately appropriate indigenous knowledge worldwide, disregarding cultural and national sovereignties, through acts of biopiracy, only to confer upon itself immunity and imperviousness by shielding the stolen knowledge behind the curtain of intellectual property⁵⁰. However, this protection would have been meaningless without an enforcement mechanism. During the 19th and 20th centuries, *intellectual property*_(private) already existed in a relatively extensive scope but was often not recognised by counterparts, and the sanctity of private property was constantly breached by the very actors that now impose worldwide restrictions on the appropriation and use of knowledge⁵¹. Thus, it was TRIPS – which not only linked «investment and intellectual property to the trade regime» but most importantly «turn[ed] this idea into a negotiating objective and then an international legal reality»⁵² – that realised the full independence and privatisation of intellectual appropriation.

With the rise of the Digital – that is, not only the technological development of computers, software, and the internet, but most importantly, the ubiquitous character that digital tools have acquired –, *intellectual property*_(private) underwent the dialectical transformation of quantity and quality. From initially being isolated within spheres of academic and military research, the destruction of the [exchange] value of the material basis of the Digital infrastructure and tools enabled an immense expansion of the Digital. Thus, the very [exchange] value of knowledge production was virtually destroyed. This amounted to a new height of capitalist contradiction because the expansion of easiness to accessing knowledge provided the overcoming of a crucial barrier to any productive activity. For instance, Argentina, Brazil, Egypt, India and Indonesia showcased the example of the generic industry of pharmaceutical drugs, enabling competitive and accessible prices of drugs that could save lives. While «India is known for its strong generic pharmaceutical industry, a result of the

⁴⁹ ROMEIRO HERMETO 2024.

⁵⁰ SHIVA 2016.

⁵¹ CHANG 2001.

⁵² DRAHOS — BRAITHWAITE 2002, p. 72.

Indian Patent Law of 1970»⁵³, the Brazilian case related to the fight against HIV was remarkable.

«Despite enormous trade and political pressure from the US and the large pharmaceutical companies, Brazil during the first part of the 1990s had played a stalling game. In 1996 it did introduce a patent law that included protection for pharmaceutical products, but that law, especially the provisions on compulsory licensing, was shaped with the price of AIDS drugs in mind. With the encouragement of civil society, Brazil went down the path of providing free anti-retroviral therapy. In those cases where the drugs it needed were under patent, it threatened the use of compulsory licensing in order to bring the price down»⁵⁴.

The United States needed to break Brazilian resistance; «[i]t would send a message to other South American states and deprive India of a potential ally in the TRIPS negotiations»⁵⁵. The power the United States had established with the fall of the Soviet Union and, thus, the lack of alternatives to its hegemony were the bedrock to enable capitalist-imperialist control over knowledge. «The longer Brazil resisted, the less likely it would be to get its US markets back and, in any case, it faced a long, uphill battle trying to get justice in a trade system that was more about power than playing by the rules»⁵⁶. India likewise faced great pressure, but the sheer size of its internal market initially served as a not-insignificant factor in containing US-American imperialist advances. However, the successful attack against Brazil broke the Brazilian-Indian axis of resistance, and, especially with the United States and the European vassals working as a block, the [Arthur] Dunkel draft had been prepared, being «labelled “DDT” and thought to be just as dangerous as the chemical of that name for the health of the country»; according to Peter Drahos and John Braithwaite «[f]or those bureaucrats in the Indian Patent Office who had seen the Indian designed patent system produce a flourishing pharmaceuticals sector capable of competing in global markets, DDT

⁵³ LENK 2007, p. 129.

⁵⁴ WATAL 2021, p. 8f.

⁵⁵ DRAHOS — BRAITHWAITE 2002, p. 105.

⁵⁶ IBID.

was very hard to swallow», but India caved, signing a final act and henceforth contracting the obligations of the TRIPS agreement⁵⁷.

On the other hand, with the Chinese economy becoming the largest in the world by PPP (purchasing power parity) since 2017,⁵⁸ China has now grown to overshadow the rule over intellectual property. According to the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), China has completely dominated intellectual property applications⁵⁹. Thus, it primarily dictates the very instrument conceived to protect capitalist-imperialist hegemony. Therefore, as it loses competitiveness in general and control over knowledge production and implementation in particular, the United States is accelerating its encirclement of China.

The US-American/NATO proxy war in Ukraine has brought China closer than ever to Russia⁶⁰, enhancing ties and booming trade⁶¹. In this sense, China now has not only an enormous internal consumer market and a fully integrated supply chain⁶² but also a reliable source of raw materials. This expedient demands strong responses from the hegemon if it is to sustain its traditional zero-sum (win-lose) strategy. Consequently, imperialist tactics to control knowledge must not be limited to *intellectual property*_(private).

As mentioned, first, Obama drew the military closer to China, encircling it; then, Donald Trump not only imposed tariffs but also sanctioned China, while Biden escalated this further, intensifying former constraints as well as the decades-long sales of military weapons and hardware to Taiwan, in clear (and constant) violation of the one-China policy formally

⁵⁷ IDEM, pp. 136, 145, 146.

⁵⁸ According to data from the World Bank (GDP, PPP (CURRENT INTERNATIONAL \$), 2025).

⁵⁹ WORLD INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY INDICATORS 2023.

⁶⁰ HONG 2023; MOSCOW-BEIJING PARTNERSHIP HAS “NO LIMITS”, 2022.

⁶¹ CHINA-RUSSIA 2023 TRADE VALUE HITS RECORD HIGH OF \$240 BLN - CHINESE CUSTOMS, 2024; CHINA-RUSSIA EXPO OFFERS DYNAMIC PLATFORM FOR BOOSTING TRADE, ECONOMIC COOPERATION: MOFCOM, 2024.

⁶² CHUNSHENG 2024.

recognised by the United States.⁶³ Besides the crucial breach of Chinese sovereignty, Taiwan serves not only as a military outpost for the US-American capitalist empire but also as a vital semiconductor producer in a world increasingly dependent on the Digital⁶⁴. This, however, is back-firing, as Chinese investments in those weaker sectors now represent China's independence from all the leverage the capitalist empire had⁶⁵, while Europe endures not only higher costs of living and production but also becomes less competitive due to deficient telecommunication infrastructure.⁶⁶ This is the context that gave impetus to the so-called Trump trade-tariff war.

The United States' 2025 tactic against China is not yielding the desired results. Imposing enormous tariffs on China and hampering its access to NVIDIA's semiconductors not only fails to slow China down but also to promote further domestic development independent of US industry. While China solidifies its foreign relations by strengthening organisations such as BRICS, BRI, SCO, and ASEAN, its economic development is also becoming increasingly more self-reliant⁶⁷. While the United States led the AI (artificial intelligence) race until recently, 2025 began to reveal that China had caught up, when DeepSeek, a virtually on-par AI model, was introduced, using a fraction of the resources of its US peers and being truly open-source. By the end of 2025, while DeepSeek had advanced further with an updated version 3.2, throughout the year, numerous highly sophisticated models were released by other Chinese developers,

⁶³ ALPER ET AL. 2024; CAMPBELL ET AL. 2024; LOBOSCO 2022; PALMER 2023; NIXON 1972; TIME 2022. Over the years, the US congressional report has systematically been called «Taiwan: Major U.S. arms sales since 1990»; it was not until recently that the name was changed to «Taiwan Defense Issues for Congress».

⁶⁴ HILLE 2021.

⁶⁵ LIU 2023.

⁶⁶ WORTHINGTON 2020. Moreover, this intensifies when one considers the energy problem caused by Washington denying Europe access to cheap Russian gas.

⁶⁷ BLAUGHER ET AL. 2025; CHAN — DiPIPPA 2024; HARDING 2024; PAOLI 2025; THORNHILL 2025; TOH 2025; WANG 2025.

for instance, Alibaba's Qwen (according to Forbes, Chinese AI models are being implemented by many Western developers and companies due to cost efficiency, privacy control, and performance⁶⁸). The fact that Meta bought Manus AI⁶⁹, developed by a Chinese start-up based in Singapore, coupled with Reuters' anxiety about what they called the Chinese «Manhattan Project», namely, China's project to compete with Western AI chips, demonstrates that US technological capital no longer enjoys a leading role⁷⁰. Thus, the last frontier that the United States hitherto dominated and that has been paramount to sustain its imperialist rampage is quickly evaporating, together with its strategy for attaining worldwide supremacy.

4. *Conclusion*

In this paper, I first sought to introduce nuance into capitalist imperialism and, second, to demonstrate both the decisive role of social property relations in it and how its control has expanded from the private property of the means of production to the domination of knowledge production through private appropriation.

Because capital is a social relation, it cannot be exhausted by an abstract universalising definition. Instead, historical processes constantly redefine it. While during agricultural capitalism, the capitalists were those landlords who were subjected not to tradition and extra-economic constraints, but to economic imperatives; during the 19th century, industrial capital was personified in the figure of capitalists, who had a direct presence managing production, but by the end of that very century, capital began to metamorphose again. The capitalist stepped aside to become

⁶⁸ TOH 2025.

⁶⁹ In April 2026, before the publication of this article, China's National Development and Reform Commission announced that «it was prohibiting the foreign acquisition of Manus and had required all the parties to withdraw from the deal» (HO-HIM ET AL. 2026).

⁷⁰ POTKIN 2025; GLOB. TIMES 2025; BUTTS 2025.

a parasitic figure of ownership without managerial capacity; concurrently, the generalisation of shareholders created a proprietary form held by a collective rather than by a few singular individuals. The decay (rather, defeat) of the Soviet Union's socialism and the rise of neoliberal strategy gave rise to a new dynamic, yet even more parasitic, intensifying a contradiction within the capitalist power to new heights. The nation-state, not invented by capital but certainly «perfected» by it to guarantee and support all its endeavours, became a special target of neoliberal capital, despite its total dependency on it. Capital became transnational while simultaneously remaining nationally configured and dependent. This dialectics can be clearly seen in two Marxist traditions that impose a hierarchical priority on one form over the other.

One of these dialectics occurs within the process of knowledge production and appropriation. It was the United States that gave impetus to the TRIPS Agreement as an international instrument to benefit Western capital. Whereas *intellectual property*_(private) remains vital to the contemporary appropriation of surplus-value – in 2019, «US-American industries accounted for 41% of the economic endeavours and comprised 63 million or 44% labour positions»⁷¹ – and also to controlling and shaping behaviour through mediatic propaganda and the big tech power, it was chiefly developed in order to protect the imperialist core by subjugating the Global South. However, China's extraordinary economic development has reached a point where it seems to completely dominate intellectual property development, thereby circumventing Western dominium over knowledge and, correspondingly, its political imperium through economic means. Therefore, the very international institution that vouched for the capitalist appropriation of surplus-value is now becoming an obstacle to accessing the very knowledge it requires to sustain its capitalist rule. Nevertheless, the United States continues to seek to maintain hegemony through the unrestricted use and threat of extra-economic powers, such as NATO, again a transnational institution, thereby causing ongoing escalation of tensions across economic, political, diplomatic, and military fronts.

⁷¹ ROMEIRO HERMETO 2024, p. 3.

As capitalism – nationally and transnationally – seeks to commodify and appropriate all spheres of life, knowledge has become a crucial tool of imperialism; however, socialism with Chinese characteristics has been at the forefront of the struggle of classes, actualising social relations that objectively supersede the subsumption of labour under the capitalist mode of production.

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