

Excerpt from *Consequences of Capitalism*, by Noam Chomsky and Marv Waterstone
Haymarket Books, 2021, pages 97-115

Chapter 3

CAPITALISM AND MILITARISM

Waterstone Lecture, January 29, 2019

...

Clearly, militarism, imperialism, and colonialism predate capitalism. There have been numerous empires throughout history. There was the age of exploration, which might also be thought of, I think quite legitimately, as the age of extermination around the globe. These activities have most often involved a search for resources, for markets of various kinds, and for labor, often slaves. The endeavors have often been aided by, and in turn have stimulated, changes in both transport and communication over time. Military might has historically provided protection for trade and mercantilism. Even before the capitalist era, we have a lot of adventures around the globe.

Let's now think about how we might explain this, particularly as we begin to move into the capitalist mode of production. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels said:

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere. All old established national industries have been dislodged by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material but raw material drawn from the remotest zones. Industries whose products are consumed not only at home but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old ones satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new ones requiring for their satisfaction. The products of distant lands and climes. (Marx and Engels 1848)

In 1848, this system was hardly underway, really. In that period, Marx and Engels were already foreseeing what we now think about as a kind of globalized capitalism.

...

One of the first major crises of capital overaccumulation, meaning surplus capital with no means to valorize itself—that is, no investment opportunities that were sufficient to entice capitalists—was a European economic collapse from 1846 to 1850. So very early on, capitalists started to experience these kinds of crises. The temporary way out of this crisis was twofold. That is, there were two main venues available for capitalists looking for places to invest, to be able to accumulate surplus value and profit. One of these was internal (i.e., domestic) investments in vast infrastructure projects in transportation, water, and sewage, housing. This is, for example, when Georges-Eugène Haussmann redesigned Paris. There are all these domestic

projects where capital could be invested and a return on capital could be developed. Most of these, of course, involved the cooperation of the state.

The second investment opportunity was outward geographic expansion of capital investment focused in large part on the Atlantic trade, with the US playing a very important role in absorbing some surplus capital. We've thought about this a little bit already, in terms of capital flight when possible.

However, the declining ability to absorb excess capital in internal projects (i.e., these kinds of infrastructure projects) and the interruption of the Atlantic trade by the US Civil War limited the capacity of these mechanisms to solve the crisis. This failure, in turn, produced an enormous wave of international financial speculation and geographically expanded trade on the part of European (and also US) capitalists.

Because these kinds of activities need a safe and secure environment, capitalists required that their nation-states develop a geopolitical rationale for aiding them (militarily if necessary) in opening up new areas and for protecting investment. In other words, capital has a logic that is dictated by its need to maximize profit and return, but that's not always matched by the logic of the state. In this situation, capital needed states to develop a geopolitical logic to accompany its own expansionist logic. But this presented a contradiction that needed to be resolved. Nation-states, which had proliferated in Europe from the mid-1600s onward, had been built primarily on the idea of internal solidarity and sovereignty rather than on foreign engagement. In fact, in large measure, that's what a state is. It's a relatively homogeneous inside population, and separated from a differentiated and heterogeneous outside.

The two logics did not really match up. If capital wants or needs to roam the globe looking for investment opportunity, and it requires the protections that states provide, states at that point didn't really have the rationale to justify these foreign engagements. How then, as Harvey and other analysts have put it, could the problem of overaccumulation and the necessity for a global spatiotemporal fix (i.e., new and different areas for investment and profit seeking—what Harvey means by a fix) find an adequate political response through the mechanism of the nation-state?

This is a problem. In other words, how could national solidarity (up to that point, based largely on internal cohesion) justify foreign adventure? Let's put it briefly. The answer was the mobilization (which is now, I would suggest, more resonant than ever) of nationalism, patriotism, jingoism, and racism to justify such foreign adventures and to legitimate what becomes known as accumulation through dispossession (which I talked about last time when I talked about primitive accumulation). This is another framing of it.

This is one of the ways in which these foreign engagements could be justified. Perfectly reasonable, it was argued, to conquer and exploit the barbarians and inferior peoples who could not put their resources to their highest and best uses. This is a paraphrase of a philosophical position from John Locke.

This launched a brutal period of competing racist-based national imperialisms, colonizations, and conquests by the British, French, Dutch, Germans, Belgians, Japanese, and

Italians. These adventures were further justified by emerging social Darwinian ideas of the white man's burden. This is the way in which these two logics (capital and state) were brought together.

The underlying contradictions between nationalisms and imperialisms could not be resolved, however, and this resulted in more than fifty years of clashes between nation-states, just as Lenin had predicted. Eventually, all of this devolved into a carving up of the globe into separate spheres of control or influence exemplified, for example, by the grab for Africa. Toward the end of the 1890s, Africa had been only 10 percent colonized. By 1914, it was 90 percent colonized. So just within a couple of decades, we can see the ways in which capital, looking for investment or resources and so forth, began to divide the globe up for itself.

This competition resulted in divisions resulting from the Versailles Treaty after World War I, including arbitrary divisions of the Middle East into newly formed states ruled over largely by Britain and France. We're still living with some of the results of these actions today. That is, many of the countries that constitute the current Middle East were whole-cloth creations that were produced after the Treaty of Versailles, which divided the region up among the reigning powers and often contradicted long standing historical arrangements.

As violent and racist as all this imperialism and conquest was, it never adequately resolved the problems of surplus capital. This eventually produced the Great Depression of '30s, which was worldwide and underpinned the catastrophe that was World War II. The same clashes keep coming back, and they're still not resolved.

Now, let me speak a bit about the US case, which is somewhat different, but results in very similar kinds of outcomes in some ways. First of all, the US was bourgeois from the outset. That is, there was no need to overthrow older forms of aristocratic or feudal power. The government represented industrial and upper-class interests, and so was opposed from the beginning to any threats to private property rights or profit maximization.

Secondly, the US was already a multiethnic, immigrant population. Appeals to homogeneous nationalism had to be constructed against non Caucasians. Of course, the concept or category of "whiteness" is itself an ever-evolving category. So non-Caucasian was a moving target, and the unifying animosity eventually had to be directed against outside others. Historian Richard Hofstadter has characterized this ongoing feature of US politics as the paranoid style, the perennial fear of outside others. And this, we will see, comes back repeatedly to haunt the geopolitics of the US.

Finally, the US, unlike Europe, had enormous possibilities for internal geographic expansion once the inconvenient indigenous population was removed. This was, again, something quite different than the European case with its extensive external colonies. Although there were periods of actual overseas geographic expansion, notably at the end of the nineteenth century and then during the so-called Spanish-American War, when the US did acquire a number of overseas territories. Again, we're living with some of the results still.

The US began to cover its expansions and occupations under the notion of "spreading American values." Seen, of course, as noble and universal and eventually being termed

globalization. Rather than conquering territory, as the European nations tended to do, the US was more about spreading democracy, so called.

Now, let's move to this second period, which is 1945 to 1970, so after World War II. In addition to a new phase of imperialism and militarism, this period also produced a number of very significant internal changes to the US and subsequently to the global economy.

The US emerged from World War II as by far the most technologically, economically, and militarily superior nation on earth. The other combatants, whether in the European or Pacific war, were largely devastated. The US's nearest competitor, the Soviet Union, had borne the brunt of the fight against Nazi Germany with enormous losses to both its population and to its productive capacity.

The Allies, interestingly enough, toward the end of World War II, delayed opening a second front in Europe to aid the Soviets, who were fighting the Germans on the Eastern front. The Allies didn't really move heavily in that direction. This inaction may have been a deliberate strategy to weaken Stalin. But one consequence of the delay was that it allowed the Soviets to accumulate and then to keep territory in Eastern Europe, and this becomes very, very important in the postwar, and subsequent Cold War, period.

These Soviet territorial gains and competing military power, combined with the Soviet anti-capitalist ideology that had long grated on US elites, bumped up against the US paranoid style to help produce and sustain the Cold War. The animosities were long-standing. In fact, the US invaded Russia in 1919, two years after the revolutions there, to thwart them, but failed to do so. We had no diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union until 1935. And the alliance between the US, the UK, France, and the USSR during World War II was quickly breaking down.

...

This anti-Soviet, anti-communism stance translated into the US foreign policy of containment and encirclement of the Soviet Union. I want to turn now to National Security Council (NSC) Memorandum 68. This was sort of the defining blueprint for how to deal with the world geopolitics following World War II. Most importantly, of course, our relationship with the Soviet Union.

It represents the culmination of a kind of battle of philosophies that can be emblemized by these two figures. One, George Kennan, and the other, Paul Nitze. Immediately after World War II or during World War II and its immediate aftermath, George Kennan's views of containment, which were really a quite passive kind of containment, held sway within US foreign policy circles.

Shortly thereafter, Nitze moved into the foreground and was the key author of NSC 68. He had a very different view of things like nuclear issues and the arms race. He thought that rather than simply passive containment, we should be engaged in an actual, very confrontational engagement with the Soviets everywhere and anywhere that we could. That we should in fact engage them because we had so many more resources and so forth in a kind of arms race, which they would ultimately lose and we would, in fact, come out as much more predominant.

...

In the name of anti-communism and the spread of freedom (usually meaning free markets and the rights of private property), following the Nitze Doctrine, the US bolstered friendly regimes through military aid, trade arrangements, credit, and so forth and opposed or toppled regimes through military confrontation, covert actions, interference in internal politics, regime change, assassination, trade and financial sanctions, and so on. Often using either UN or other military alliances, for example, NATO, as “coalitions of the willing” to cover otherwise unilateral actions. I need not enumerate all of these, but I’ll have a few more words about them in just a minute.

...

Whenever there was a conflict between democracy and order, defined as the protection of elites in capital accumulation, the US came down on the side of the latter. This 1945–1970 period also gave rise to the military industrial complex (MIC), and the related speech by Dwight Eisenhower warning of the incipient power of the MIC and its ongoing control and influence of US economic and military policy.

To generate profits in that sector, there must be continual and expanding arms sales and therefore the constant proliferation of enemies. In addition to building the power of the MIC economically and politically, this has contributed to the ongoing and dangerous militarization of the planet, including proliferation of nuclear weapons.

...

Once the Soviet Union fell, this was a little bit of a problem. There was even some talk of something like a peace dividend. Once we didn’t really have an enemy, maybe we could start spending these untold millions and billions at home, but that quickly evaporated.

Basically, what we did, we found a new enemy. The global war on terror is the perfect enemy. In fact, it’s better than a state-based adversary. It can never really be defeated, but it can (in fact, must) be continually fought.

This period is what Michael Ignatieff in Prospect Magazine called “Empire Lite.” It’s got a nice ring to it. It sounds good. Says Ignatieff, the new US Empire

is not like the empires of times past, built on colonies, conquest and the white man’s burden. We’re no longer in the era of the United Fruit Company [another interesting choice given what happened in Guatemala in this period], when American corporations needed the Marines to secure their investment overseas. 21st-century imperium is a new invention in the annals of political science, an Empire Lite. A global hegemony whose grace notes are free markets, human rights and democracy enforced by the most awesome military power the world has ever known. (2003)

“Lite” right until you need something heavier, in other words, “the most awesome military power the world has ever known.” In fact, just for the record, and contrary to these claims, Ignatieff’s New York Times colleague, Thomas Friedman, openly proclaimed in his column, March 28, 1999, at the time of the bombing of Yugoslavia, that it takes the military contractor McDonnell Douglas to ensure the safety of McDonald’s around the world. Slightly different view of Empire Lite.

Now, I want to start thinking a little bit about the consequences of all of this kind of imperialism. We'll leave aside for the moment the European case and just concentrate on the US for now, but we'll come back to the European case the week after this.

William Blum, who died in December 2018, was an incredibly interesting activist, analyst, and had some things to say about US interventions, principally in a publication called *Third World Traveler*:

The engine of American foreign policy has been fueled not by a devotion to any kind of morality but rather by the necessity to serve other imperatives, which can be summarized as follows: Making the world safe for American corporations. Enhancing the financial statements of defense contractors at home who have contributed generously to members of Congress. Preventing the rise of any society that might serve as a successful example of an alternative to the capitalist model. Extending political and economic hegemony over as wide an area as possible as benefits or befits a great power. This in the name of fighting a supposed moral crusade against what Cold warriors convinced themselves and the American people was the existence of an evil international communist conspiracy, which in fact never existed, evil or not. (1999)

Finally, the United States carried out extremely serious interventions into more than seventy nations in this period, and we're still very busy.

...

Another ongoing feature of continued militarism is the use of racial, religious, xenophobic, nationalistic rhetoric to keep the public in a constant state of fear. This is part of the way in which we maintain and justify this militarism abroad. But another consequence is that this militarism comes home. There's a pervasive common sense, fear of dangerous others. This is the sort of a Hofstadter model, the paranoid politics on steroids, dangerous others. This fear must be constantly reinforced, and we see it all the time in discussions of the border wall or any number of these other characterizations of these caravans of dangerous people coming to invade us.

Some analysts have renamed the welfare state, which obtained basically from about 1945 until in the 1970s, the garrison state. State legitimacy now depends on protection from these threats by targeting of dangerous others. I'll say more about this in two weeks, but just to repeat what I indicated last week, the idea that the globalized form of capitalism means that decisions about the economic security and welfare of citizens are no longer within the hands necessarily of nation-state governors. To preserve their legitimacy as governors, they need to find a new basis for legitimation. Some people are arguing, and I would agree with much of this, that this is the new basis. The protection from dangerous others. We have endless enemies.

Foreign communism morphed into terrorism. We now have a tremendous fear of immigrants and refugees. Witness the recent ban orders, the deportations, the detentions, the demonization of others. We have domestic enemies, people of color, the young, the old, LGBTQ communities, the differently abled, and along with that the militarization of the police and the criminalization of protest, which we'll talk about in the last couple of weeks. Where is all of this

headed? The Pentagon has a very bleak view of the future (see “Megacities: Urban Future, the Emerging Complexity: A Pentagon Video”), which views urban areas (both foreign and domestic) as basically breeding grounds for instability, unrest, and chaos. To think about the kind of underlying view of humanity this way I think comes naturally in some sense out of this very long history of militarization. That is, if you think of yourself as military, then everybody outside is an enemy.

This is also what becomes part of the problem of militarizing the police. As the police become increasingly militaristic, the people that they supposedly protect and serve begin to look more and more like the non police, like the enemy. This is, I think, an extremely dangerous kind of trend that we’re seeing.

The forecast that this is the way in which the military will sort of reproduce itself by now being able to respond to these kinds of future threats where the mass of humanity is either an enemy or is in a witting or unwitting cloak for enemies. It’s extremely dangerous. One we should think very carefully about, but this is the Pentagon’s view largely of what that future looks like, and it is, in fact, urban, militarized, and dangerous.

If you found this excerpt useful, please consider supporting Haymarket Books by purchasing the full book, [here](#). And remember: DSA chapters and working groups are eligible for a [bulk discount](#) from Haymarket.