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Again an Age of Empire

By: Joan Martinez-Alier

The world is back in an 'Age of Empire'. There are now Four Empires—the West or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, China, India, and Russia, all motivated by securing naked power and putting hopes of an eco-feminist and eco-socialist future on the back burner.

We are moving back to the “Age of Empire”, as the period between 1875 and 1914 was called in Eric Hobsbawm’s tetralogy. Now, there are Four Empires, the West [basically the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)], China, India, and Russia.

Trying to recover the Tsarist and Stalin empire, Russia attempts the Anschluss of Ukraine, even as India alters its constitutional arrangement for Jammu and Kashmir. China attempts a takeover of Hong Kong, perhaps Taiwan, reaching out elsewhere through its belt and road investments. China is not only becoming an empire where flag follows trade but also one that shows growing military teeth.

This is not a multipolar world but a world with Four Empires, each with its respective sphere of influence or colonial system. Other political entities such as the European Union, Japan, and Brazil are a part of the West-NATO empire. Russia and India are empires that compete against each other but also support each other against smaller local enemies.

These empires repress their internal peoples and colonies because of geopolitical threats that actually exist or they imagine, and they forget about human rights, indigenous territorial rights, the environment, feminism, and social equality. As a matter of fact, they are militantly anti-feminist.

They tend to repress or even forbid international and national organisations for environmental justice on the grounds that they are foreign infiltrated entities. Geopolitics rules—neo-liberalism is no longer the issue; it is state power to which corporations are allied. Peace movements are repressed and attributed to foreign interests.

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The main motivation and political ambition of all the Four Empires is naked power. Compared to past eras, the novelty now is the threat and likelihood of regional nuclear wars to impose such dominion. Russia dominates Siberia and has military alliances with the Central Asian countries, and in Europe, with Belarus and the enclave of Kaliningrad in the Baltic. A very large empire indeed.

In the West, the NATO alliance has never had much to do with democracy and human rights. It suppressed anti-colonial rebellions and independence movements such as Patrice Lumumba’s in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1960. It accepted António de Oliveira Salazar’s Portugal and its colonial wars in Africa, and many other military dictatorships in Latin America and elsewhere. In the West, there are still small sub-empires—the Françafrique and the remains of the British Empire—but they are all under US-NATO control.

The new Age of Empire dismisses the movements of civil society and represses internal anti-colonial movements. Even if we had hopes of an eco-feminist and eco-socialist future, which is able to cope with the threats from climate change and biodiversity loss through grassroots movements for environmental justice, the reality is now the Age of Empire. The empires have an inclination to extract materials and energy from commodity production, often displacing and eliminating indigenous peoples. State power serves this purpose. Both corporations (public or private) and state organs are in alliance against grassroots social movements that support or reinvent new commons.

Political consensus on international public policies based on environmental scientific work in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) has always been feeble and it is now disappearing in inter-imperial rivalries. Two empires (Russia and China) now even have programmes exhorting women to have more children. In the West-NATO empire, some socially marginal groups are allowed to criticise economic growth and

even propose “degrowth” or “prosperity without growth”, but such doctrines are absent in China, Russia, and India.

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One characteristic of India’s attempt at empire is its religious motivation and language. It is true that in the US-NATO territory they sometimes talk of Christian values—the West was rather militantly Christian but now secularism predominates. This is even more evident in China and, I think, Russia. However, in India, the Hindu religion provides strong political motivation. This contributes to cohesion, but also adds imagined external enemies. In addition, religion helps the state against the Adivasi (indigenous) communities opposing extractivism.

In Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s geopolitical fantasy, the threat of the Islamic world would make India one of the Four Empires. Hindu-tinted world aspirations are growing, and there is an empty imperial slot for India, a country that is a nuclear power. One would have preferred a Gandhian or at least a Nehruvian Bandung role for India, but reality is going in a different realpolitik direction. Thus, Modi supports Russia in Ukraine.

It is said, “War is health for the State”—and empires understand that a dose of the war medicine might have to be given to subject peoples from time to time, without interference from the ridiculous universal values of peace and human rights.

Islamism is a religion, not really a political entity capable of becoming an empire. Indonesia is a former colony that is, in imperial terms, more or less still disputed. In the 1960s, with an anti-Communist purge, it clearly belonged to the US empire, but it now has more and more Chinese investment.

The Christian religion was used imperialistically in the European Crusades. It was also later used in the conquest of North Africa by France and Italy. And even before that, after 1492 in the Spanish empire—Hernán Cortés and Francisco Pizarro appeared with a sword in one hand and a holy cross in the other, and a friar nearby reading the bible to perplexed (west) Indians. And the Portuguese arrived in Asia as Christians (as in Goa, where St Francis Xavier’s mausoleum is). But after the enlightenment, Western values became officially more secular.

Perhaps Islamism will not be the seat of an empire. I do not think that the Ottoman empire will revive. Turkish President Recep Erdoğan profits from the struggle of empires (Russia and NATO) to suppress the country’s Kurds internally but will not expand outward. Yet it will develop a nuclear capability. Pakistan is now on the defensive, I think, and trying to become a Chinese economic colony. Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Turkey, and Egypt are big Islamic states but without a common purpose. Egypt’s rulers even kill Islamic political militants.

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So, there is no Islamic empire. This leaves the world with Four Empires, all nuclear armed. The West (NATO) is in relative retreat but it still is the most powerful. China, Russia, and India are advancing in internal repression and outside expansion. India is the only empire still using religious motivations.

Africa and Latin America have no political standing of their own. They follow their role of being material and energy providers, sometimes changing their colonial masters but always suffering from a natural resource curse born of structurally negative terms of trade. Unless strong anti-extractivist social and political movements take command, they will be unable to escape from this ecologically unequal exchange.

There is alarm, however, in the US-NATO empire over the increasing influence of China and, to some extent, Russia in Africa and Latin America. From a Latin American or an African point of view, instead of attempting to play games with one empire against another, the best strategy would be to adopt a policy of “a plague on all your houses”.

All this is happening in a world of increasing violence, or what Cameroonian historian Achilles Mbembé calls necropolitics. One of the aspects of imperial power is regional wars. Another one is the cruel closing down of borders to migrants, as we see in the Mediterranean and the US.

Those who believe that another world is possible—an eco-pacifist, feminist world—should earnestly endeavour to not fall under the influence of any empire and, if possible, boycott all Four Empires.

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