

Nothing's More Precious Than a Hole in the Ground

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AUSTRALIANS INTERESTED IN INTERGENERATIONAL DISPOSSESSION NEED LOOK NO further than the ground on which they stand. The theft of land from the first people of this country is not just a spiritual and cultural disinheritance (though the spiritual and cultural dimensions of this dispossession cannot be overstated) but one which is dizzying in its economic immensity. The vast wealth beneath this land, which legally belongs to First Nations Australians, underpins the Australian economy as it is currently constituted. Indigenous sovereignty and restitution of land, and, thus Indigenous command of Australian extractive industries is the necessary horizon of Australian politics and intergenerational justice. Yet, I argue, this goal comes into direct conflict with Australia's sub-imperial place in the US-led grouping of nations and the current constitution of the Australian state and economy. Both Australians committed to advancing Indigenous sovereignty and those advocating for further state regulation of the resource sector must recognise what history tells us: even moderate measures in these directions will face opposition from the centre of capitalism's empire. Below, I attempt to clarify certain dimensions of this apparent impasse, historicise some of its key aspects, and provide various grounds for hope.

Intergenerational injustice is a geopolitical issue, and is therefore historically complex. My generation is one formed under the sign of the protracted collapse of really-existing socialism, beginning with the Berlin Wall. Capitalism's victory

march was the soundscape of my generation's infancy. We learned to speak our names while the coin of 'democratic values' minted in the United States of America seemed to become the global currency. We learned to walk while the Soviet Union fractured and Francis Fukuyama proclaimed history's end, the cessation of a struggle between capitalism and communism, and 'the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government' (4). National borders were drawn and redrawn in blood and fire. Before I started kindergarten SFR Yugoslavia had begun to fracture. With the exception of a few ostensibly anachronistic hold-outs Eastern and Central Europe bent to a new world order and opened their resources, markets and governance to US and Western European capital and dominance.

It is now clear that Fukuyama was a false prophet. Against his pronouncement of a 'total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism' (3) and the expectation of a unipolar world, we can note that the number of Western-style liberal 'democracies' in the world remains a decided minority, whether measured in terms of the number of countries, or in terms of their quota of the world's population. Rather than emerging as an 'end point of mankind's ideological evolution' (Fukuyama 4), Western liberal democracy is, as John Frow suggests, demonstrably unable to grapple with climate catastrophe and other existential crises facing our present and future (Frow). Perhaps the most obvious proof that Fukuyama got it wrong is China, which has not embraced Western-style liberal democracy as its economy grew, which numerous Western analysts and politicians complacently predicted it would (see, for example Rowen). In contrast to China's enormous growth and advances in poverty-alleviation, at the time of writing Western capitalism has atrophied into an unpopular, cannibalistic mode of capitalism driven by neoliberal austerity, characterised by low productivity, poor working conditions, an intensification of inequality, and an unsettling fetishisation of corporate aesthetics.

There was a time—before I was born—when the success of different socialist, left-wing and revolutionary nations and movements was of immense interest to large sections of the so-called 'Western' left. Australian examples could include the internationalist orientation of much Australian union activity, including communist support for anti-imperialist sovereignty drives, such as for China in the 1930s. The 'Hands off China' committee and the NSW Trades and Labor Council's call to black ban Japanese goods in support of Chinese resistance to Japanese occupation, led to the Waterside Workers Federation's famous refusal to load pig-iron bound for Japan in 1938 (Ward). In 1970, the Australian leftist magazine *Outlook*, called for a 'sympathetic interest in Castro's Cuba, the South East Asian revolutionary movements, and the liberation movement in South Africa' (Turner 3). Other local, though not 'Western' examples could be drawn from the long and rich history of Aboriginal activism's interest and connections with African

decolonisation movements, from the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association's foundational Garveyism (Maynard 6) to the internationalism of Redfern 'Black Power' activists in the late 60s and 70s (Foley 8-9).¹

A Western turn away from internationalism and towards critiques of power cannot be traced back to a single point: one cannot place it simply as a result of, say, the New Left insurgencies, Foucault or indeed fractures within or around the Soviet or Sino-Soviet projects. In our time a great contradiction has arisen between ethical minoritarianism, in itself not a bad thing, and any notion of commanding the machinery of state through which some, but not all, of these ethical conundrums can be resolved. To frame the climate crisis through the lens of individual or even generational guilt and argue it should be addressed through an ethics of care risks obscuring both its material and historical foundations and its potential remedies. John Frow, writing on the 'agents' that hold some power over the 'transmission of a world' laments that they are 'nation states, political parties, ... and only in the last instance a citizenry with a stake in a future world' (26). Yet it is vital at this juncture that we do not abandon the idea of a nation with a responsibility for its citizenry, or a political party with responsibility for the future. The globe is not solely constituted by multi-party democracies held hostage to fossil capital with a disenfranchised and economically privileged citizenry. In those other nations—marginalised and blacklisted as they might be by Northern centres of capital and imperial power—there are models worth considering.

A hostility to states and nations, while understandable in the specific Australian sub-imperialist context, does not hold up to theoretical scrutiny if our horizon is equality: global, intergenerational and otherwise. Samir Amin, for instance, notes how an "'anti-state" strategy' unites perfectly with the capitalist's strategy to reduce actions by the state to redistribute wealth and regulate corporations, and instead reduce the state's role to its policing functions (27). At this late stage of ecological catastrophe, the mass extinctions and depredations of our planet under capitalism demand, as an ethical imperative, large-scale changes that can be only enacted on the level of the state and international blocs with sufficient organisational capacity and drive to bring such changes to fruition. Likewise, a total antagonism to 'nation' does not get us anywhere. Expressions of Australian nationalism typically operate along state-sanctioned lines and celebrate invasion, colonisation and genocide. This is because Australia is not Indigenous-led, and because it remains, in real economic and political terms, shackled to an old empire (Britain) and dependent on the new one (the United States). However, to have a wider view, informed by the histories of anti-imperialism and decolonisation in Asia, Africa and Latin America, is to be aware of the crucial role of national liberation movements in successful struggles against colonial rule. Nation can be

¹ For Indigenous engagement with the USSR see Piccini.

the only thing that stands between a group of people and their exploitation by imperialist powers. Nations can be revolutionary, such as the national liberation fronts in Southern Africa, nations can be Indigenous, as with First Nations. A discourse without sufficient nuance on the question of nation ignores how, in contemporary geopolitics, it is on the level of nation that military and economic imperialist endeavours are met with the most significant resistance. Being unequivocally against nation, to quote Amin, 'encourages the acceptance of the role of the United States as military superpower and world policeman' (27).

Unfortunately, the fall of the USSR and historical mistakes of socialism have encouraged, generally speaking, a drawing inward among Western leftists, towards individual ethics and away from the ethical pursuit of power. The turn of the left away from international solidarity and towards capitalism and compromise can be read sociologically. Radhika Desai notes how the major parties of the left within bourgeois capitalist states are today commandeered by a professional managerial class of neoliberal converts, whereas their counterparts in earlier eras had been socialists and Marxists. The result is a left that mistakenly 'attributes the prosperity of the major capitalist powers to capitalism's productive vigour, not their imperialism, and refuses to contemplate how to organise production in socialist societies and how to do so against the inevitable opposition of imperialism's remaining bastions' (Desai). Comprehending the textures of imperialism is key here. If we view the world solely through a lens cut by the US imperial core, we will be blind to geopolitical material forces and context, we will not see what empire does nor will we comprehend the alternatives outside it. If we actually want transformation within Australia and the centres of imperial capital it subordinates itself to, it is imperative to look and learn from alternative models being practiced in the world. At the very least we can learn what not to do, and recognise the vast difficulties of the challenge ahead. For the sake of the planet and our species we need to ask: what is it that we can learn from countries that in their post-revolutionary phases have not only built barricades of resistance to the US world order, but also made significant achievements at home? Is intergenerational justice possible without geopolitical materialism?

In the opening sections of the *Communist Manifesto*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels align class struggle with imperial exploitation. The struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat plays out in a struggle between nations; between nations open and closed to the bourgeois market. The bourgeoisie:

compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image. ... Just as it has made the country dependent on the towns, so it has made barbarian and semi-barbarian

countries dependent on the civilised ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West.

In these sections of the *Manifesto* Britain's treatment of China and the opium war is the key example, but the general movement Marx and Engles describe continues into the present and seemingly into the future. All that has changed is the locus of empire, with the language of 'civilisation' as a justification for imperialist wars and regime change supplanted in recent times by self-satisfied references to 'democracy' and the 'rules based international order'.²

The wide-ranging and ongoing history of United States military, political and economic interventions across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Central and Eastern Europe and Latin America points to the mutually reinforcing nature of US imperialism and US capitalism. The dynamics of what Leon Trotsky termed uneven and combined development involve dominant centres of capital accumulation being 'driven by capitalism's contradictions to maintain capitalism's uneven development, that is to say, to create and maintain the structures of imperialism' (Desai). Ultimately, the expansion of capital, to again quote Amin,

cannot occur by the force of economic laws alone; it is necessary to complement that with political support (and military, if necessary) from states in the service of dominant capital. ... Washington's objective in Iraq, for example, (and tomorrow elsewhere) is to put in place a dictatorship in the service of American capital (and not a 'democracy') enabling the pillage of the country's natural resources and nothing more. The globalized 'liberal' economic order requires permanent war—military interventions endlessly succeeding one another—as the only means to submit the peoples of the periphery. (23-4)

Australia's relationship to an imperialising and dominating United States, is, as Clinton Fernandes has recently argued, a sub-imperial one. Australia's state apparatuses, such as its intelligence service and the military, have no independence from their US and UK equivalents, and Australia's two major parties

² Amin notes the recent nature of this justification: 'Not so long ago the dominant dogma in the West ... was that democracy was a "luxury" that could thrive only after "development" had resolved the material problems of society. Such was the official doctrine shared by the leadership of the capitalist world (which enabled them to justify their support for military dictators in Latin America and autocratic regimes in Africa)' (42). The United States does not seek to democratise the regimes it intervenes in, but to pillage their natural resources and transform them into client states. Moreover, democracy and transparency are consistently in conflict with the authoritarian logic of capitalism, where public power becomes the exclusive provenance of a small group of billionaires. The intensification of inequality under neoliberal austerity has seen power held by an increasingly tiny and wealthy corporate elite. Democracies within capitalist countries, as Frow suggests, are captive to fossil fuel industries. There is no democracy without socialism.

of government, Labor and Liberal, both identify US strategic interests as Australia's own. Most tellingly of all, Australia is economically dependent on US-owned extraction companies.³ As the result of British colonisation and investment, Australia has a 'monoculture' economy reliant on the exporting of mineral resources and agricultural goods and specialising in only a few products such as iron ore, coal briquettes, gold, petroleum gas and wheat (Fernandes).⁴ The bulk of Australia's economically crucial mining and energy sector is owned by US-based investors, and as a result, Fernandes observes, 'domestic policy reflects the fact that vital sectors of the Australian economy are integrated into the value chains of US corporations'. For Fernandes, '[t]his is the essence of an imperial order: state sovereignty is subordinated to the interests of private investors, who can count on the support of their own powerful home states to create and preserve that order'.

Despite its situation of dependency, Australia is an anxiously willing, rather than reluctant colonial subject, and practices imperialism in its own limited and cowardly way, seen for instance, in its exploitation of Timor-Leste's natural resources. In the geopolitical playground Australia is one of the weaker members of a group of schoolyard bullies, a follower of the kids it has identified as the strongest. This is the position it has taken in post-World War II history, where it joined with the US and Britain in suppressing Asian nationalism in Korea, Malaya, Vietnam and Indonesia. Fernandes notes how the aim of these interventions was to:

defeat revolutionary social transformation among former colonies and to install local regimes that were formally independent but economically subordinated to Western interests. Native leaders who left colonial social institutions and class relationships intact were accepted by the West, including Australia. They did not challenge local or foreign vested interests in landholdings, plantations, banks, railways, mines, businesses or government debt arrangements. But the West, including Australia, used military force, economic strangulation and intelligence operations against native leaders who wanted a new social and political order. The desired order was an imperial one: former colonies achieved formal independence but would remain subservient to the interests of private investors in crucial ways. The euphemism for this structure is a 'rules-based international order'.

³ Australia's subordination to the US extends beyond the US domination of its resource sector and to its integration in a US dollar-dominated global financial system.

⁴ The low economic complexity—or lack of diversification and specialty in Australia's exports makes Australia's economy anomalous among advanced economies, and similar to the economies of Kazakhstan, Cambodia, Kenya and Saudi Arabia (Fernandes).

Thus, my rejoinder to Frow's moderate and sensible point that the Australian state should introduce measures to control carbon emissions and exercise more regulation over its resource sector is that it is not simply the Murdoch press that might oppose this, but the sub-imperial make-up of the entire Australian state, its geopolitical role and position. Foreign policy, military alliances and defence treaties *make* domestic policy. One could argue, as John Pilger and Guy Rundle, among others, do, that Australia did, briefly, resist the sub-imperialism of its construction during the years of Gough Whitlam's Prime Ministership. If this is indeed the case, then what happened to Whitlam is telling. Whitlam was by no means a member of the radical wing of the Australian Labor Party, and initially avowed himself a staunch supporter of the Australian-US alliance. Yet the Whitlam administration made advances in Aboriginal land rights, moved Australia towards the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM, still functioning, though in a different capacity today), condemned the US bombing of Vietnam, opposed nuclear weapons testing, increasingly sought to put limits on Australian intelligence sharing with the US, and threatened to close Pine Gap. Alongside these steps towards an independent foreign policy was an ambitious plan to nationalise Australia's extractive industries. Rex Connor, Whitlam's resources minister, planned to 'buy back foreign-owned mining leases, nationalise the resources sector, and use the money to develop a full uranium sector, creating virtually free electric power' (Rundle). The presence of US diplomat Marshall Green in Australia at the time of Whitlam's dismissal connects the constitutional coup that deposed Whitlam to US-orchestrated regime changes in Korea and Indonesia, as do Governor General John Kerr's deep links to Anglo-American intelligence. In Rundle's words, Kerr, 'a former CIA client sacked an elected prime minister prime minister who was threatening to end the US alliance. It was a crackdown on a government of a one-time sycophantic ally that now dared to show a moderate degree of independence'. The next Labor Party leader after Whitlam was Bob Hawke, a longstanding CIA informant (Coventry), and Australia's longest serving Labor Prime Minister.

Far less ambitious proposals than Connor's resource policy will encounter external pressures. Take, as a more recent example, Kevin Rudd's mining superprofits tax plan. US diplomatic cables leaked by Chelsea Manning and released by WikiLeaks, reveal that senior Labor figures involved in the leadership spill that deposed Rudd for Julia Gillard were US informants, including Mark Arbib and Peter Khalil (Matovinovic).⁵ The cables criticise Rudd's approach to foreign policy, quoting among their other informants BHP Billiton VP for Government

⁵ Hawke, Arbib and Khalil are just three of many examples of CIA informants within the Australian Labor Party and Australian trade unions. Labour Attaches at the US consulate cultivated connections within the Australian labour movement. A 1981 publication, produced by the Committee to Defend the Victorian A.L.P., provides an account of US interventions in Australian and international union movements. 'Most conservative union officials in Australia have had some contact with U.S. Labour Attaches' *Pattern of Deceit* 194.

Relations Bernie Delaney ('Prime Minister Reigns'). Contrastingly, the cables praise Gillard as someone whose previous left-wing politics have 'shifted towards the political center' and is a 'strong supporter of the Australia-US Alliance and Israel' ('Gillard'). Gillard would later dilute Rudd's mining tax, which would then be dismantled entirely when the Liberal Party, in coalition with the National Party took power. Taken together, the examples of Whitlam and Rudd suggest how proposals to reform Australia's resource sector require an administration willing to pursue an independent foreign policy. More urgently, these two examples suggest that politicians wanting to intervene in Australia's predominantly US-owned resource sector will face considerable external pressures from Australia's imperial masters.

The task ahead of us is immense, but to see clearly who our opposition is is an important first step. To be geopolitically conscious is to realise that beneath our sense of what's possible, and even what is right, lie the structural foundations of geopolitical blocs and imperial interests. Fernandes notes the enormous power the United States has to 'influence the international narrative', with US news agencies, wire services and films shaping perceptions of it and other powers.⁶ These forces undergird the fabric of our cultural life in ways that we might barely register.⁷

Let us not remain in our naïveté: Australia currently is part of the US-led world order. Generational justice is impossible without geopolitical shifts, which are class shifts too, linked to the materiality of nations. If Australia was to be genuinely independent, if land rights and sovereignty was restored to First Nations Australians and they could claim their rightful inheritance, and if the Australian state was to circumscribe foreign exploitation of its resources, then we would need to choose different allies and form new blocs. While the subordination of key Australian state apparatuses—including the military—to the United States complicates movement in this direction, the presence of real-existing socialist, anti-imperialist and Indigenous governments in Asia, Southern Africa and parts of Latin America offers hope for a pluripolar world that can deliver climate justice. Study in this direction may produce the foundations upon which a radically different Australia could be built.

I leave the reader with the following quotations, offering them up both as a lesson in recent history and a warning.

⁶ A growing body of research examines the important role both the CIA and the US Department of Defence play in US television and cinema, particularly Hollywood blockbusters. See, for example, Jenkins and Alford.

⁷ That Paul Keating has emerged as a lone prominent critic of AUKUS reflects the situation that we are now facing: an Australian media and Australian political class which regard as bizarre anything that might not be an enthusiastic subordination of the Australian military and the Australian people to US geopolitical interests.

The U.S. administration wants to destroy Iraq in order to control the Middle East oil, and consequently control the politics as well as the oil and economic policies of the whole world.

----- Saddam Hussein, Letter to the UN General Assembly, 19 September, 2002

Don't forget that it's not just us they're coming after, we are just the convenient scapegoats to get the uranium out so that the state can keep the power ... they come for us today they'll be coming for you tonight.

----- Dennis Walker, Speech to Invasion Day rally, Brisbane, 26 January, 2008

There is a conspiracy to control Libyan oil and to control Libyan land, to colonise Libya once again. This is impossible, impossible. We will fight until the last man and last woman to defend Libya from east to west, north to south.

----- Muammar Gaddafi, Speech, August, 2011

Why is Venezuela being politically, economically and diplomatically attacked? ... for global geopolitical reasons, Venezuela is a nation with a largest oil reserve in the world ... Venezuela has also significant natural and mining richness.

----- Nicolas Maduro, Speech to the UN, 27 September 2018

My sin was being indigenous, leftist and anti-imperialist.

----- Evo Morales, Resignation announcement, 11 November 2019

We will coup whoever we want! Deal with it.

----- Elon Musk's response to the accusation that the United States government organized a coup against Evo Morales so that Musk could obtain Bolivia's lithium. Twitter Post, 24 July 2020.

Lithium is a key input in batteries that run millions of laptops and upon which the United States is basing its electrified automotive future. Chile sits atop the world's largest lithium reserves.

----- Opening sentence, *Washington Post* Editorial Board, 'Chile should send its proposed constitution back for a rewrite', *Washington Post*, 31 August 2022

Alert, compatriots! The visit of the US ambassador to the Government Palace was not free, nor was it in favour of the country. It was to give the order to take the troops out into the streets and massacre my

defenseless people; and, incidentally, leave the way clear for mining operations.

----- Pedro Castillo Terrones, Twitter Post, 16 December 2022

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