

BOOK REVIEW: Anti-Imperialism in the Age of Great Power Rivalry

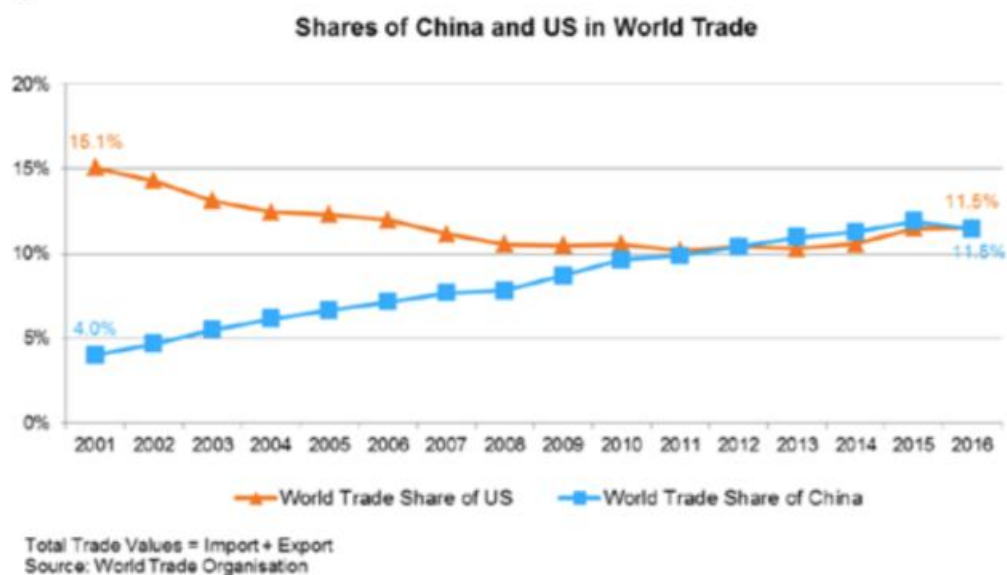
[Louis Proyect: The Unrepentant Marxist](https://louisproyect.org/), April 22, 2019, <https://louisproyect.org/>

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In early February Michael Pröbsting, a leader of the Revolutionary Communist International Tendency, invited me to read and review his "[Anti-Imperialism in the Age of Great Power Rivalry: The Factors behind the Accelerating Rivalry between the U.S., China, Russia, EU and Japan. A Critique of the Left's Analysis and an Outline of the Marxist Perspective](#)", which I have finally gotten around to. The subject of the book is of keen interest to me since I have written a [couple](#) of [articles](#) that concur with Pröbsting. To be honest, I don't make the question of whether Russia (or China, for that matter) a Trotsky vs. Shachtman/Burnham litmus test like he does but the research he uses to support his conclusions is impressive and worth considering as a serious attempt to apply Lenin's theories to the contemporary period that stand on their own.

"Anti-Imperialism in the Age of Great Power Rivalry" contains 27 tables and 31 figures that detail capital flows, etc., all of which are relevant to the questions at hand. In order to apply Lenin's theories to today's world, it is necessary to continue in the same vein as "Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism" that is replete with the same kind of data. I found this one particularly compelling:

Figure 16. Share of the US and China in World Trade, 2001-2016 ⁸⁵



Except for some hold-outs by otherwise sensible people like Michael Roberts, most Marxists concur that China is not only capitalist but a direct challenge to American hegemony as indicated by the chart above. Keeping in mind that Lenin defined imperialism as a system characterized by the export of excess capital, Pröbsting was careful to document China's growing presence globally. Some on the left

hail the new Silk Road project as a progressive alternative to Western multinationals but the growing resentment in both Latin America and Africa casts a shadow over such optimism.

**Table 10. Foreign Direct Investment Outflows by Country in 2017
(in Millions of \$US and as Share of Global FDI Outflows) ⁹⁷**

<i>Country</i>	<i>2017</i>	<i>Share of the Global FDI Outflows</i>
<i>Total</i>	1,429,972	100%
<i>USA</i>	342,269	23.9%
<i>Japan</i>	160,449	11.2%
<i>Britain</i>	99,614	7%
<i>Germany</i>	82,336	5.6%
<i>France</i>	58,116	4.1%
<i>China</i>	124,630	8.7%
<i>Russia</i>	36,032	2.5%

Referring to the table above, he notes: “When we look at the accumulated stock of FDI’s outflows (by 2017) it is interesting to see the rapid catch-up process particularly of China. Despite the fact that China only became an imperialist power about a decade ago, its FDI Outward stock already equals the figures of all other Great Powers (except the U.S.)”

While some might be persuaded that China is becoming an imperialist power, there remain skeptics over whether Russia is as well, especially by those on the left like Roger Annis who have a strong ideological commitment to the Kremlin. For example, Annis [wrote](#):

But while its per capita GDP may be well above that of Ukraine and other former Soviet republics, it’s not in the same league, by a long shot, of the imperialist countries. It is roughly one fourth, or less, that of North American and West European countries. It is higher than Brazil’s, but a lot lower than Portugal’s and just over half of South Korea’s.

What about Russia’s capital exports, another key indicator of whether a country sits in the ranks of imperialist countries? In 2012, the stock of direct foreign investment in Russia was \$498 billion while the stock of investment abroad was \$387 billion. Compare this to Canada, with about one quarter the population of Russia: \$992 billion (domestic), \$992 billion (abroad). Or Britain, with less than half of Russia’s population: \$1.3 trillion and \$1.8 trillion, respectively (all figures are 2012, from the CIA Factbook).

Pröbsting acknowledges that Russia is weaker than China or the traditional imperialist powers but stresses its military and political weight. Furthermore, if Russia is far behind England or Germany in terms of financial capital—the traditional criterion for judging whether a country is imperialist or not—it is still in second place behind the USA when it comes to the global share of weapons exports (33 versus 23 percent).

While I have not paid the closest of attention to the debates on the left about “sub-imperialism”, I did read Pröbsting’s discussion with some interest since I am close to Patrick Bond as a friend and a comrade. Patrick is probably the highest-profile advocate of the usefulness of this analytical category. Ever the resourceful scholar, Pröbsting argues that the first instance of its being advanced within Marxism was not by Patrick but by Takahashi Kamekichi in the 1920s who theorized Japan as an example of “petty imperialism”. Since Japan lagged behind the European and American nations in terms of financial capital and capital export, he concluded it “had not yet attained the stage of imperialism”. As such, Japanese socialists should not see the main enemy as being the domestic bourgeoisie, but rather the Western powers. Doesn’t this have a ring? This is essentially the argument of the pro-BRICS left, those who defend Russian imperialism in Syria because it helps the “axis of resistance” to NATO, Western banks, and the whole nine yards. However, Patrick is at the same time one of the sharpest critics of the BRICS as well as a “sub-imperialism” theorist.

These are important questions and Pröbsting has done a good job in trying to provide Marxist solutions. My only friendly criticism is to drop the terms “pseudo-Marxist” or “pseudo-Trotskyist”. Such terms are redolent of the Socialist Equality Party and should be retired from our vocabulary.