**On Rereading Lenin’s Imperialism: A Rejoinder**

# Dear Jerry,

# Let me take this opportunity to wish you and wish all of colleagues and friends on the list a healthy and happy New Year. My sabbatical year (2008-2009) was back-breaking but fairly productive. And as soon as I wanted breathe a little the Iranian pot has begun to boils with no let up and of course with never-ending heartbreaks. I am still working on the issues surrounding the new development in Iran, and thus wish to remain off the list for another semester. The counter-comment below is not an off-the-cuff but an intended response. I am grateful to Paula Cerni for her brave and feisty challenge and the opportunity provided by OPE-L to me to respond. I wish that when one reads my post-election Iran (a result of cumulative decades of theoretical contributions to Marxist theory and nearly 4 decades of political activism) one gives oneself adequate time and thought to go through all pertinent references (and arguments), including my previous work (nearly 40 pieces are referenced here) and other numerous references that both theoretically and empirically frame the plethora of issues surrounding the epoch of imperialism. I don’t wish to reinvent the wheel anytime I tend to respond to a tiny question or misinterpretation.

# Comradely,

# CB

# Supporters of the so-called classic theory of imperialism, it seems, do not share the same politics as Ms. Paula Cerni tells me in her e-mail—following her comment on my recent article: <http://www.cira-jira.com/Vol%20%2026.2.1%20Bina-%20Post-Election%20fall%2009.pdf> ([Cyrus Bina, Post-Election Iran: Crossroads to History and a Critique of Prevailing Political Perspectives](http://www.cira-jira.com/Vol%20%2026.2.1%20Bina-%20Post-Election%20fall%2009.pdf)). But, as scholars on this magnificent list should know, sticking to this epochal concept (without having a faintest theoretical understanding about its genealogy in Marx) has created an embarrassing, if not entirely reactionary, scapegoat for many on the radical left where it comes to its today’s application. And in my recent travel and lecture series in the United Kingdom over issues on post-election Iran and US foreign policy, I find it hard to believe that the majority of the traditional left, more or less, had taken a favorite position toward the paramilitary government of Ahmadinejad in post-election Iran. Here in the US, certain self-proclaimed Marxists, say, in *Monthly Review* (New York) had already thrown out the anti-fascist and forthright tradition of their magnificent founders to the toilet bowl and, in conjunction with providing an outlet to propaganda by habitual opportunists (including the known agents of the Islamic Republic in the United States) defended this atrocious, anti-women, anti-worker, and anti-democratic regime in Iran. This is one hell of a practice (as Ms Cerni’s updating of the theory of imperialism would imply) to call Ahmadinejad an anti-imperialist, as its analogue. And, as I have tried to show in this piece (and my previous work), the lack of adequate methodological insight (see, among others, my 2006 in the *International Journal of Political Economy* and 2007 *Global Economy Journal*) on the one hand, and the complexities associated with our present epoch (particularly, the US posture and the posture of several different Pax Americana, pre-Pax Americana, and pre-pre-Pax Americana entities, such manifold ‘fundamentalisms’ in terms of Islamic, Christian, Jewish, etc.) on the other hand, seemingly wreaked havoc with an entire spectrum of the left—from the very liberal to the very unbending doctrinaire today. Therefore, in this confused and confusing global environment, following the law of average, eclecticism and adopting an “intermediate” position become easily an order of the day.

# With this preamble, I wish to briefly take issue with Ms. Cerni who started out to comment on my piece by saying:

# Bina's article on Iran, which I read with great interest, fits rather well with the discussion we were just having on imperialism. I find myself in an intermediate position between his views and those of the radical left he criticizes…. [M]y view is that the classical theory of imperialism needs to be updated rather than thrown out altogether; it seems to me that Bina is himself attacking what is only an inflexible, dogmatic interpretation of that theory (Paula Cerni, “Theory of Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century,” *Theory & Science*, 2006).

First, in this debate, Ms. Cerni identifies her position as an “intermediate,” and then rushes to the judgment that as if I am “attacking what is only an inflexible, dogmatic interpretation of that theory.” Well. She is right to identify her position as intermediate—i.e. eclectic; but she is entirely wrong in the interpretation of my position. I am adamantly against any position, eclectically (read journalistically, unmethodically, etc.) or otherwise, which extends Lenin’s (and by implication, Bukharin’s) theory of imperialism (i.e., an epoch-bound theory dealing with a specific period of capitalism) to our present epoch. The present epoch we live in, capital (as a social relation) is transnationalized in all its forms and thus in this unified social relations the system is not only beyond the colonial era but also beyond the borders of the nation-states—the nation-states that are already transformed rather qualitatively beyond the Lenin’s era. This conclusion is systematically connected with competition in Marx, wherein capitalism progresses from its infancy toward its maturity and competition increases and explodes with globalization of capital. This position (i.e. Marx’s position and similarly my ownposition and the position of other pioneering Marxist scholars, such as John Weeks, Anwar Shaikh, Ben Fine) allowed me to develop a complete value theory for the global oil sector (i.e., from its cartelization through its de-cartelization and globalization) whose theoretical and empirical validity has yet remained intact. And if one can speak of capitalist completion (albeit in the presence of unremitting concentration and centralization of capital) in this heavily “integrated” sector, one may have easier time to speak of competition in other sectors across the globe at this stage.

Ms. Cerni kindly sent her 2006 article in *Theory & Science*, entitled: “Imperialism in the Twenty-First Century.” And—while due to my commitment to several different projects, plus post-election Iran, I do not wish to go through it line-by-line, nevertheless I have found it interesting but realized that why we’re still passing each other on the issue involved and what’s wrong with this—to put it in Ben Fine’s apt phrase uttered in another occasion—“dialogue of the deaf.” It appears that she is coming from a theoretical foundation in international relations, known as Realist or Realism—which to me is not “realist” at all. Yet, she is realist enough to go back to Bukharin (safer name in bourgeois circle, although as significant and remarkable on the subject). My theoretical core, however, comes from political economy based on Marx’s and the empirical investigations surrounding its historical and theoretical validity. That is why I expected to see discussions on Marx’s value theory and certainly recognition of the transnationalization of capital in Cerni’s piece. Here, I think the methodological significance of why Lenin’s—(or Bukharin’s, given the fact that Lenin himself wrote a nice introduction to it)—simultaneous conditions, such division of the world among: (1) great powers, (2) capitalist monopolies and trusts, (3) export of capital, etc., are lost in translation, so to speak.

There are numerous issues involved here, but let me refer to a paragraph from Cerni’s article on the issues that’s taken for granted, for instance on the centrality of nation-state and the role of American hegemony, focusing on the diminishing US capacity in production of “immaterial” production.

The dominance of these ‘post-material’ sectors – a symptom, as we will see, of imperialist decay - has fostered the illusion that they constitute independent engines of growth[3](http://theoryandscience.icaap.org/content/vol8.1/cerni.html" \l "_edn3). Thus, there has been no convincing Marxist critique of Daniel Bell’s (1999) and Joseph Nye’s (2002) argument that the IT revolution can bring about a new American century. Indeed, many left-leaning authors have expressed their own fascination with a Western-based capitalism that, instead of a material relation between people, appears as a collection of immaterial flows of information and de-materialized personal relationships (Ibid.).

I am not a stranger to the above-mentioned literature and to discussions by certain individuals on both sides of the so-called debates on the new American century. Indeed, at the inception of some of these arguments and counter-arguments, I was a first-hand observer. The difficulty with all these arguments is two-fold: (1) that the protagonists in these debates have a partial view of the world, yet when from time-to-time awakened by harsh realities and facts on the ground, they convince themselves over a Martini or two to redesign a foreign policy based on an “intermediate” framework, which includes, for instance, a soft-power/hard-power (read good-cop/bad-cop) configuration, and (2) that they do not have a clue whatsoever that a reductionist interpretations of (US) hegemony (often erroneously attributed to Antonio Gramsci) does not get them anywhere, so far as the US foreign policy is concerned. Let me repeat myself for a thousandth time: *Hegemony is not the same as domination.* Allow me not to reinvent the wheel here, again and again. Those who are interested in my work may read through nearly 40 articles footnoted to my post-election Iran. Not to mention, I have also made my position known against other approaches, such as the taken by Giovanni Arrigi’s, Davis Harvey’s (the so-called New Imperialism), and others whose method of analysis does not allow them to let go of the contingencies of “access” and “territory,” in order to see clearly through the synthesis of the social relations today.

Consequently, when I say that the post-hegemonic/post-Pax Americana coincides with the epoch of globalization of capital in which Imperialism (as an epoch—not as an act or a policy) is over, I mean that, in general, all imperialist actions and foreign policy postures are doomed at their inception. The last word, *inception*, is of major significance, since these actions and policies are doomed to failure even before they are being materialized. Ms. Cerni tends to persuade us to “update” the theory of imperialism with the contemporary facts. She does not realize that this theory is epochal in its entirety as its shelf value has already expired. Besides, on the pure logical level, Ms. Cerni attempts to prove a theory whose premise (read Cerni’s article, particularly repeated references to Bukharin’s production relations, etc.) appears to be incomplete and even contradictory, thus creating a position that is symptomatic of the classic case of Russell’s Paradox. Imperialism, as dogmatically argued by some, is not “the highest stage of capitalism.” It’s not even a complete capitalism as far as the inclusion of great bulk of humanity within the capitalist system is concerned.

At the same time, speaking rather casually about the so-called sphere of influence is a sheer tautology. The main question is how the development of material conditions, in conjunction with social relations, would come to transform the world in an organic sense. Of course, there are political and ideological contingencies that, like anything else in concrete history, are neither predictable nor preventable. That is why Marx speaks of the laws as tendencies, and it is within such tendencies that (capitalist) development or (capitalist) underdevelopment of a country comes to play. In the interrelated world a reductionist notion of “sphere of influence” is often being invalidated by the seeming political contingencies and disappointments, as Iraq, Afghanistan, and presently Pakistan has demonstrated to us so far. Yet, there is a consistent pattern of failure on the part of US policy on all these fronts that is far from contingent and rather distinctly epochal—and I would grantee on the any other such fronts in the future. Let me reproduce the paragraph by Ms. Cerni, which is also seemingly used as a weapon of choice (in this case very bad choice!), inaccurately portray me as being close to “Third Worldist” paradigm. Yet, for someone like me who has been from the pioneers of the transnationalization of capital (and among a very few who, independently, coined the world “Globalization” in the early 1970s) it’ is astonishingly hard to decipher. Let’s listen to her explicit point:

Today we still have a mixture of direct and indirect means, with the latter being far more common. Spheres of influence - often overlapping each other - have mostly, but not completely, replaced colonial empires. I don't think this change invalidates the theory of imperialism, any more than Marx's theory of capitalism is invalidated by the undeniable fact that capitalism today is not exactly the same as it was in the nineteenth century. However, if we update our analysis in this way, then we have to honestly admit what is clear to anyone with a minimum knowledge of world affairs - namely, that it doesn't only apply to the 'Western' nations. Iran, for example, also has a sphere of influence. Curiously enough Bina doesn't seem to be aware of this, and in this respect he is much closer to the 'Third Worldist' paradigm than he realizes (Ibid.).

I would respectfully urge Ms. Cerni to look at the world strategically and in a long-run framework, and recognize the internalizing of forces that are rather cumulatively conveyed by the transnationalization process. Recognition of the nation-state is a fact of life, but relying on it as a unit of analysis would not take us far. Let us, when speak of Marx, we look at his method of analysis and argue for (or against) the validity and relevance of his value theory (as Sweezy did rather bravely but, alas, wrongly!) and refrain from focusing on nonsensical argument (e.g., by pro-Ahmadinejad radicals) of his belongingness to the 19th century—or similarly of Bina’s national origin as an identity with Third Worldism. Let us not to change the conversation in order to upstage the 20th-century Lenin (or Bukharin) as relevant to our present epoch. To be sure, Lenin’s (and Bukharin’s) theory of imperialism belongs to a particular stage of capitalism which is now behind us. However, Marx’s manifold theory, particularly his theory of competition—(please do not identify it as “free competition” marketed in bourgeois textbooks or in the so-called Realist literature in international relations, cited in Ms. Cerni’ paper)—is now more than anytime relevant to the contemporary global economy and polity. Here, as I said in my previous writings, “one cannot be a little pregnant” where it comes to methodology, particularly Marxist methodology. AS I have shown briefly in my piece on *Post-Election Iran* (2009), Lenin does not even recognize the meaning of rent in Marx’s sense, thus he also stumbles on the significance of Marx’s competition.

Finally, the so-called Iran’s sphere of influence, alluded to by Ms. Cerni, is not separate from the US foreign policy, which in turn itself reflects the predicament of US socio-economic/socio-political situation—in the post-Pax Americana/ post-hegemonic America—which then inevitably in circular mode takes us back to the epoch of globalization. This is a clumsy tautological oversight—a cardinal sin of in methodological proportion that is common in the international relations literature today. I wish to encourage colleagues on this list to read Ms. Cerni’s article critically and find for yourselves: <http://theoryandscience.icaap.org/content/vol8.1/cerni.html>.

Respectfully,

Cyrus Bina

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