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“The Power of Imperialism” An Analysis of the United States’ Intervention in Afghanistan through Adam Curtis’
The Bitter Lake (2015)

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Abstract

The aim of this dissertation is to analyze if the United States' operations in Afghanistan throughout the second half of the 20th century were imperialist interventions or part of the foreign policy in the context of the Cold War. The analysis is going to be performed using the documentary *The Bitter Lake* (2015) by Adam Curtis' as historical background, alongside with Hobson's *Imperialism: A Study* (1902), Lenin's *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916) and Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) theses' of imperialism. In the analysis, firstly, imperialism is going to be defined and typified, afterwards, Curtis' documentary will be studied to determine that these operations were an imperialist intervention.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Imperialism, United States, *The Bitter Lake*, Interventionism, Cold War

Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar si las operaciones que Estados Unidos llevó a cabo en Afganistán durante la segunda mitad del siglo XX fueron intervenciones imperialistas o parte de la política exterior en el contexto de la Guerra Fría. Para llevar a cabo este análisis, se usará el documental *The Bitter Lake* (2015) de Adam Curtis como contexto histórico, y las tesis del imperialismo de Hobson *Imperialism: A Study* (1902), de Lenin *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916) y de Arendt *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). En el análisis, primero, se definirá y tipificará lo que es imperialismo, para luego estudiar el documentar y determinar que estas operaciones fueron parte de una política imperialista.

Palabras clave: Afganistán, Imperialismo, Estados Unidos, *The Bitter Lake*, Intervencionismo, Guerra Fría

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1. Introduction

The conflict in Afghanistan is probably one of the hardest during the Cold War and one of the most controversial. It has been active since 1979 until nowadays. However, this is not a prototypical military conflict between two nations, but part of a rising tension between the two main powers of the time, the United States and the Soviet Union, whose geographical expansion in the Middle East could be considered as imperialist. Nevertheless, this warfare has blurred and reached a point where we do not know whose sides have participated in these series of interventions over the Afghan territory. Adam Curtis, in his documentary, *The Bitter Lake* (2015), tries to encompass the importance of what happened in Afghanistan at all levels, with special attention to the role that the United States played in the territory.

The aim of this paper is to analyze if the United States' interventions in Afghanistan since the 1950s could be considered as imperialist interruptions, or mere economic exchanges and military trade before the military invasion on account of the 9/11. To do this, I will focus on three studies regarding imperialism: John A. Hobson's *Imperialism: A Study* (1902), Vladimir "Lenin" Ulyanov *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916), and Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). These three approaches to imperialism are complementary and include different perspectives: the first one is an economic analysis; the second one involves political aspects of imperialism; and the last one considers the issue from a more contemporary approach after the World Wars. By applying the three of them, this paper elaborates a definition of imperialism as the interventionist policies of Great Powers in strategic territories for economic reasons without taking formal control of their institutions but creating economic dependency to the greater nations. Using their resources as well on military and aggressive diplomacy to accomplish their political interest in the intervened country, being the origin for this policy the political emancipation of the bourgeoisie. Further on, the analysis of the documentary will be performed based on the theoretical framework structured around the common features from the definition that will be extracted. This dissertation will therefore argue that, since imperialism can still be applied to conflicts after the First World War, the American presence in Afghanistan has been imperialist

interventions scattered from the 1950s until the 2015 withdrawal of troops, rather than mere foreign policy in the context of the cold war.

1.1. Adam Curtis' biography

Kevin Adam Curtis was born on May 26, 1955, in Danford, Kent, England. He grew up in a leftist family: his grandfather ran for the parliament as a socialist and his father was the cameraman for Humphrey Jennings, the renowned English filmmaker. However, he does not define himself as leftist, but a follower of the liberal Max Weber whose outlook challenged the “crude, leftwing, vulgar Marxism that says that everything happens because of economic forces within society” (Ulrich Obrist). He began his PhD studies at Oxford, where he was teaching politics, but he left academia due to the fact that he became disillusioned with it; shortly after, he would join the BBC.

In the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s he was a conventional documentary producer for the BBC, where he made a film for a training course comparing clothes design to weapons design; afterwards he was given a post at *That's Life!*, a magazine series, where he made films about talking dogs. However, his distinctive style flourished with the release of the six-part documentary *Pandora's Box* (1992) was released, where he uses a collage to explore the menace of technocratic reality. His other works include: the four-part *The Mayfair Set*, which targets casino capitalism; and another four-part series, *The Century of the Self*, where he explores Sigmund Freud's theories and how they were used in a consumer society such as ours, where he stated that his position is “very close to a neoconservative” (Darke 2012). These works were rich in footage to create the setting for the shocking plot that Curtis tries to embrace in every documentary. Curtis masters this technique in *The Power of Nightmares* (2004) a three-part documentary. These documentaries explore the idea of a parallelism between Neoconservatism and Islamism, which heavily differs from the above-mentioned plot of *The Century of the Self*. Apart from his documentaries, he had more cultural productions through a BBC blog called “The Medium and the Message.”

He is considered a prolific documentary filmmaker with a peculiar style. There are recurrent topics among all of Adam Curtis' works: the analysis of the materialistic reality that we are living through visual archives of the BBC; an anti-imperialist approach, regardless of which imperial country, the Soviet Union or the United States or even China; the attempt at myth busting against the media and the loss of the individual power against the new structures of power. His documentaries try to induce a critical opinion on the viewer using topics or footage that is out of their comfort zone, such as the Middle East.

Regarding politics, even though, as it has been mentioned before, Curtis' position in *The Century of the Self* is "close to a neoconservative" (Darke 2012), it is important to highlight that he states in the aforementioned Darke's interview that he is closer to the libertarian movement and that the left have failed to provide any alternative for the working class. Moreover, he is also attracted to radical movements, but as he states "I'm a progressive, I mean that's really what my politics are. I mean, I'm typical of my time, I don't have a consistent set of politics and I always suspect people who do" (Kachiyan and Nekrasova). It can thus be argued that his political statements had fluctuated from more arrogant neoconservatives into a moderate progressivism within this time of around 25 to 30 years, but always maintaining his interests towards the radical movements and specially his interest in the Middle East conflict as a central axis of today's Western society problems such as the loss of political power or the rise of speculation in the financial system.

2. Adam Curtis' *The Bitter Lake* (2015): summary of the documentary

The Bitter Lake (2015) is a documentary by Adam Curtis that is the focus of this study, therefore, the historical events addressed in the film need to be summarized in order to be analyzed afterwards. The documentary is structured in two parallel narrative structures, the first one is the political history surrounding the Middle East conflict since the Quincy Agreement, held at the Bitter Lake, Egypt, in 1945 between the President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and the King of Saudi Arabia, Abdulazizz Ibdn Saud. These meetings will explain the following events that are going to take place in the Afghan territory. The second narrative structure consists of footage with no apparent connection. Curtis is the narrator himself, and he states several times that these footages might appear irrelevant to the storyline. The images are at times cruel and raw, such as dead corpses appearing in the streets, while other times they are just portraying curious or even folkloric moments of the Afghan culture.

The beginning of the documentary dates to the Bitter Lake meeting, in the Suez Canal, where Roosevelt met with Saudi Arabia's King. Conscious that the United States needed oil to keep the world running as he was doing, in this meeting, the king of Saudi Arabia said that they would take the money and technology, but the United States had to leave their faith "alone" untouched. This faith was a new wave of Islamism called Wahhabism, that had arrived in response to European colonialism in the 18th-century. Far from a mere religious movement, Wahhabism was a political-religious trend that tried to create a Caliphate that would control Islamic countries. It is characterized by its radical, violent, backward and extremely puritanical approach to Islam. Roosevelt's deal implied the construction of dams as part of the technological modernization that the United States offered. These dams dried the salt from the lakes, which resulted in opium poppies growing, but the United States did not want to stop because the construction of dams was a central part of the fight against the Soviet Union. Afterwards, the opium business and its exportation to the United States would be a problem for the American country and for the civil society in Afghanistan since local landowners would rise as tyrants due to the money earned for drug dealing.

Afghanistan was a fragmented country divided between ethnic groups and tribes, such as the Pashtuns. The Afghan territory was an axis of competition between the sides

of the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States, as well as China, who offered ways to modernize the country. Mohammed Daoud, the President of Afghanistan, and a Pashtun, toyed with all of the countries to consolidate himself in power. The most important of these projects was the Helmand's dam, built by the Americans, which would consolidate the power of the Pashtun's nomads in the Afghan country.

In 1973, a bloodless coup arranged by the Prime Minister, Mohammed Daoud, took place in Afghanistan. This uprising tried to implement a model of Western democracy in the country. The king was sent to exile. This coup meant the first attempt of an Americanization of the Afghan territory, but the situation would become remarkably unstable, not only with the new Afghan government, but with the global economic situation.

The economic situation in the Western countries collapsed due to the Middle East War against Israel, in which the United States supported the Jewish country. The Arabs were facing the disaster, but they counterattacked economically by raising the price of oil five times. This forced the United States to make Israel retreat, which led to a cease fire. This increase in the price of oil was so impactful for the economy that made the banks and the financial system to break free from political control in the United States and in the Western countries, which would translate in the government losing control of the economic system and the financial system and speculation gaining hegemony in the value of the dollars. The bankers were building a new financial system. These factors led to a collapse in the economic situation in the Western countries.

Instability rose due to the 1973's coup and the economic situation, creating a breeding ground that led to a revolution in 1978. Their first leaders were Nur Muhammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin, from the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), of Communist ideas. The Party was founded mainly by students who brought radical Marxist ideas from the United States. There seemed to be popular support in some Afghan tribes to see the never-ending transitions towards a Western democracy coming to an end. The main aim of this revolutionary government was to redistribute land fairly, to get rid of the remains of the feudal system, so every farmer could own their own land, but, in Helmand, it provoked hatred and rivalry regarding the distribution of the land, which would end destabilizing the entire new regime. The revolutionary government was

formed and Taraki was appointed head of state, and head of government, while Amin was appointed Chairman of the Revolutionary Council and Chairman of the Council of Ministers, a more secondary role.

The internal disagreements between both leaders led to Amin arranging the death of Taraki, the president, choking him to death, and ordering the death of his opponents and drowning a hundred political prisoners in the southern province of Helmand, which worried the Soviet Union about the unsafety in the revolutionary government and in the PDPA, and forced them to a military intervention. By the end of 1979, the Soviet forces arrived in Afghanistan to take control of the situation created by Amin, who was appointed new president by himself, and to get rid of him. After several attempts, including poisoning and snipers failed, and, in the end, they attacked the Palace and shot him.

At the same time that these bloody events, internal fights and the Russian intervention were taking place in Afghanistan, in the other part of the world, Ronald Reagan was elected president of the United States of America on November 4, 1980. He won after ten years of social and economic crisis, and he based his discourse on the oversimplification and the moral fables, where the world is divided in good versus evil and that this “good” will win again under his politics. This vision of the world will unify the entire Western world, political conflict that were political struggles were redefined as demonic forces that threaten innocent people, and the role of the good people of the West were to intervene, as it was the case of Afghanistan, where Reagan was supporting and training the rebels against the government.

Under Reagan’s government, the CIA worked with Saudi Arabia training Islamic fundamentalists and leading them to attack Afghanistan and the communists, instead of the primary targets of these rebels, which was Saudi Arabia. These young radicals went to Afghanistan to fight the communist invaders, being Osama Bin Laden among them. However, these fundamentalists only became influential in Afghanistan when the Soviet Union started their process of disintegration, losing their control in the Afghan territory.

In the 1980s, the Soviet Union began its collapse. Their idea of society was failing, it became stagnant, and there was a feeling of mistrust towards the government. In spite

of this, the Soviets attempted to create a new model of communism in Afghanistan that could save the project. The Soviets took over Afghanistan and they put Babrak Kamal, another revolutionary student, as President of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan. Moreover, thousands of doctors and teachers were sent to make the life of the people better, and Afghan women were taught to be independent, in order to make the women free from what was viewed as a retrograde religion.

In spite of what the Soviet Union was providing in the cities, the fundamentalists became more powerful. This coalition of guerrilla groups was known as Mujahideen, and they increased their attacks with the American weapons, so they started boycotting the Soviet convoys. However, the Soviets started a search for these rebels and in the meantime, hundreds of civilians were massacred and the idea of a new wave of communism in Afghanistan began to disappear. The Soviet retreated to the cities.

Shortly after, the Mujahideen leaked into the cities and started to use explosive objects against everyone who got in their way, especially Soviet civilians. Similarly, the United Kingdom forces, who had joined due to the NATO alliance to supervise the situation, were been threatened by the Mujahideen. The fundamentalists wanted to gain sovereignty of the Afghan country.

Meanwhile, in the United States and in the United Kingdom, due to the economic situation after the aforementioned Middle East War and the economic collapse that it brought, right-wing governments arrived with more radical strategies to deal with the massive increase of oil in order to create economic growth. In the mid 1980's, the right-wing governments removed the restriction on the banks lending money, which kept the economy working and growing. The power's process of decentralization accentuated towards the financial system, leading to a loss of political sovereignty into a more speculative system in the Western countries. It would translate into the Great Powers of the Western countries losing political sovereignty over their own countries to the speculative economy.

In the power vacuum that remained following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent withdrawal of the Soviet troops from Afghanistan, different waves of Islamic fundamentalists started a fight against each other for power. As a result, Kabul

was completely destroyed, and the violence spread all over the country. The Taliban took over the country and oversimplified the world with Wahhabism principles. They were religious, revolutionary, and a fundamentalist side of the Islamic world, economically supported by Saudi Arabia and in the beginning by the United States. They banned films, music and art painting in Kabul, based on a recreation of how they thought the Islamic society worked in the 7th Century. They dug and burned the bodies of dead communists in order to cleanse and purify the land. The other reaction came from Osama Bin Laden, whose ideas differed from the Taliban. He wanted to use the Islamic principles in a new way, to go forward, but these ideas were not publicly supported, and Bin Laden was convinced that this lack of support was due to the United States' influence, whom he named as "the Far Enemy", and on whom planned a direct attack.

In 2001, after the 11th of September terrorist attacks arranged by Osama Bin Laden, the United States decided to invade Afghanistan, not only to find who was responsible for the attacks, but they also wanted to create a Western Democracy following the oversimplified fables of good versus evil, and how these forces of evil that had terrorized the Western countries will become free individuals and Democracy will naturally grow. The next ten years would be politically agitated by the constant visits of politicians, diplomats, soldiers... which was in a way similar to what the Soviet project was 20 years earlier, while at the same time economists and bankers moved to Afghanistan with the same idea of the future for Afghanistan as a Western Democracy.

The Americans appointed many people to run the country in different regions, but many of them were the same violent corrupted warlords that the Taliban had dethroned, and they used their new power to terrorize the country again. Moreover, opium traders made it to higher positions in politics; this corruption applied even to the police and the drug dealers became a huge problem. This massive economic injection by the United States and the United Kingdom allowed them to spread the corruption in a legal frame, instead of their previous subversive power, where these warlords empires run the country as well as the opium business and drug trade while terrorizing the local people.

By 2006, the British and the Americans realized that their project had failed, and large parts of the country were falling into anarchy. In Helmand, with the drug business due to Roosevelt's dams, there were armed groups fighting for the territory. The British

were sent to take control of the area from the Taliban and to help the regional government of president Karzai, but the problem was the president himself, so they sacked him, and tried to be supported by the police, but, as it has been stated before, the police was the military branch of the Governor. Therefore, the locals believed that the United Kingdom's soldiers were allies with their oppressors, and the British thought that these people were Taliban, throwing bombs at them, making more people averse to the British invasions. Afterwards, the police turned against the British as well. All of this chaos did not matter because they were still simplifying the narrative as the Western good against the Taliban evil, even though most of the people fighting them were not Taliban. As a result, they were not able to contain the war, they escalated it.

Two instances made the Afghan people realize that what the United States was bringing to the country was not democracy. The first one was the economic collapse of 2008 all around the globe. The government rescued the banks instead of reinforcing the system, giving away billions of pounds and dollars into the banks hoping that these would save the economy and the society. The second one took place in 2009, when the Presidential Elections were allegedly rigged by these warlords, Afghanistan had become an ungovernable territory. The British and the Americans had to give up their dream of a modern Democracy in Afghanistan.

After these two crucial events, the Presidential Elections and the economic collapse, the economic forces in Afghanistan smuggled money and bought luxury properties in Dubai, around 10 million dollars per day. The Afghans noticed that the United States had not brought democracy, but more corruption and poverty to the country. Meanwhile, the fundamentalist became more radical and declared a "total war", characterized by massacres even in civilians in the nearby territories. In 2013, what was known as the Islamic State was born in Iraq. Just a year later, by the end of 2014, all of the British troops were withdrawn from Afghanistan, and the bases were wiped out.

The end of the documentary is a reflection of the Soviet film *Solaris* (1972). The documentary owes its title to the already mentioned Bitter Lake meeting, as well as the Soviet film *Solaris* (1972), in which, Soviet astronauts find a new planet with a giant ocean which seems to be conscious. The astronauts irradiate the ocean with x-rays, however, it was the ocean which was really irradiating them in a vivid way, causing them

to distrust each other. The Soviet journalist, Aytom Borovik, wrote about this same event happening between Afghanistan and the Soviets in the 1980's; the conflict was bringing this distrust to the center of Russia, where the astronaut returns home and he is just not able to trust anyone, which is similar to what we have lived, the simple fables of good versus evil were not true anymore, and what is needed is a new story that all of us can believe.

3.Theoretical framework

3.1 Approaches to imperialism

Imperialism is a term that has been largely discussed and the aim to find a unified definition has been important to geopolitical and philosophical theories in order to understand the influence that capitalism had in the World Wars, especially the first one. Imperialism may be defined as “the state policy, practice, or advocacy of extending power and dominion, especially by direct territorial acquisition or by gaining political and economic control of other areas” (Britannica). This control may be earned through military or economic force, mainly, or in a more subtle way, through culture. The concept of empire has appeared throughout history, however, when referring to Imperialism, the general understanding leads us to the end of the 19th Century and the 20th Century. The period of time between 1875 and 1914 was an era of territorial expansion of the nations seeking for new markets and hegemony in other territories.

For the purpose of this paper, we need to learn different approaches to Imperialism to understand the role and the interests of the different sides and nations that took part in this conflict. It is important to highlight that the main premise of the documentary is that nothing makes sense anymore in our politics, and in the Afghan conflict, therefore, this warlike issue has become undefined and vague, and the nations do not know what or why they are fighting anymore. In order to achieve this analysis, three different approaches to Imperialism have been selected: the first one is John Atkinson Hobson’s, written in 1902 in *Imperialism: A Study*, concretely, “Chapter V: The Taproot of Imperialism”, which encompasses the pages from 76 to 99; the second one is Vladimir “Lenin” Illych Ulyanov, in his writing *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916), a work clearly inspired by Hobson’s study, but with different parts of the analysis and especially the solutions given; and finally, Hannah Arendt’s first chapter of the second part of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: “The Political Emancipation of the Bourgeoisie”, where Arendt argued that imperialism at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries was the consequence of two conflicting logics: that of the geographically bounded nation-state, and that of the unlimited expansion of the capitalist economy.

The following section will analyze these approaches, being the first one Hobson's, as it was remarkably influential for the other two theses that are going to be dealt in the following sections, Lenin's and Arendt's one.

3.1.1 Hobson's approach

John A. Hobson's study was published in 1902, and it is a politico-economic discourse about the negative financial, economic, and moral aspects of imperialism as a nationalistic business enterprise. Hobson argues that capitalist business activity brought about imperialism.

"Chapter V: The Taproot of Imperialism" is the part that is going to be addressed. In this chapter Hobson aims to explain the rise of what he calls New Imperialism in the 1870s and 1880s, when Britain and the European powers engaged in a tumultuous fight over colonies. In this fight, there was a shift from the British colonialist pattern, which was global dominance through free trade and influence on the political, towards a formal control over colonies:

"So long as England held a virtual monopoly of the world markets for certain important classes of manufactured goods, Imperialism was unnecessary. During the last thirty years this manufacturing and trading supremacy has been greatly impaired: other nations, especially Germany, the United States, and Belgium, have advanced with great rapidity, and while they have not crushed or even stayed the increase of our external trade, their competition is making it more and more difficult to dispose of the full surplus of our manufactures at a profit. The encroachments made by these nations upon our old markets, even in our own possessions, make it most urgent that we should take energetic means to secure new markets." (Hobson 77)

The main argument is that advanced industrial capitalism produced an excess of capital which had no profitable target in the domestic economy. This led to the need to find new markets overseas, which led to the annexation of territories in order to save the existing investments and markets for this overproduced capital, as well as securing new areas.

Hobson emphasizes in the beginning of the chapter that this "taproot of Imperialism" (77) is not in nationalist pride, but in the capitalist oligarchy. Therefore,

imperialism is a form of economic organization, which he describes as unnecessary. If you are not going to say anything else about nationalism you can omit this paragraph

Rich capitalists received a disproportionately higher income than did the working class, and these rich capitalists were deciding to invest the money in this so called new markets opened through Imperialist methods instead of investing that in their own factories. In his own words, “[t]here is no necessity to open up new foreign markets; the home markets are capable of indefinite expansion. Whatever is produced in England can be consumed in England, provided that the "income," or power to demand commodities, is properly distributed.” (Hobson 94).

Moreover, he makes an interesting point regarding spending “our natural resources on militarism, war, and risky, unscrupulous diplomacy, in order to find markets for our good and surplus capital” (Hobson, 93) which is a main problematic that is going to be dealt in the following analysis.

In other sections of this chapter, he deals with the specific cases of Britain and the European powers, and the United States. He specially emphasizes the case of the United States due to its need to avoid the periodic trade-depressions that the European powers were suffering from, and that is why Hobson may foresee that the United States are going to become the main Imperialistic powerhouse.

To sum up, Hobson’s selection is an economic analysis of how the Great Powers needed new markets for their surplus, but it does not add a non-capitalist solution for the occupied territories by imperialism, only for the nations that expand towards the weaker ones. Lenin will maintain the core of the economic analysis but with a more political approach.

3.1.2 Lenin’s approach

Regarding Lenin’s work, we cannot extract just one chapter or section as in the other approaches, it is needed to encompass the work as a whole since every chapter is a factor that the author considers essential to understand Imperialism according to him.

As it has been mentioned before, the author is highly inspired by Hobson's work, however in Hobson's study, he treats Imperialism as an economic aspect of capitalism, while Lenin also deals with the political aspect that it implies, and its main difference is that Lenin redefines Imperialism as a higher stage of capitalism instead of an immoral economical practice Lenin's main goal in *Imperialism* was to show the colonial expansion and Imperialist rivalry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and how this intervention were changing the nature of capitalism in itself, however, he rejects that there was not imperialism before the 19th century:

Colonial policy and imperialism existed before the latest stage of capitalism, and even before capitalism. Rome, founded on slavery, pursued a colonial policy and practiced imperialism. But "general" disquisitions on imperialism, which ignore, or put into the background, the fundamental difference between socio-economic systems, inevitably turn into the most vapid banality or bragging, like the comparison: "Greater Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism Rome and Greater Britain". Even the capitalist colonial policy of previous stages of capitalism is essentially different from the colonial policy of finance capital. (87)

On page 10, Lenin will differentiate five essential features of imperialism, which are:

1. The concentration of production and capital has developed to such a high stage that it has created monopolies which play a decisive role in economic life.
2. The merging of bank capital with industrial capital, and the creation on the basis of this "finance capital", of a financial oligarchy.
3. The export of capital as distinguished from the export of commodities acquires exceptional importance.
4. The formation of international monopolist capitalist associations which share the world among themselves.
5. The territorial division of the whole world among the biggest capitalist powers is completed.

Lenin was clear that the most important feature of imperialism was the first one that he listed:

If it were necessary to give the briefest possible definition of imperialism we should have to say that imperialism is the monopoly stage of capitalism. Such a definition would include what is most important, for, on the one hand, finance capital is the bank capital of a few very big monopolist banks, merged with the capital of the monopolist associations of industrialists; and, on the other hand, the division of the world is the transition from a colonial policy which has extended without hindrance to territories unseized by any capitalist power, to a colonial policy of monopolist possession of the territory of the world which has been completely divided up. (91-92)

Lenin's argument was that the rivalries and wars between capitalist powers were inherent in one of capitalism's basic features: the tendency for capital to become more centralized and concentrated, which meant that the dominant capitalist enterprises needed to acquire the closest position to a monopoly in sectors of the national economy. Therefore, a net of capitalist relations is created and every single person is subjugated.

It is remarkable that Lenin states that it is not merely an economic theory, but political. He describes that imperialism is not merely the monopoly of certain economic sectors, but of violence in itself to repel the reactions of these annexed territories. Moreover, it is interesting that he considers that "corruption and bribery" will be inherent to these oppressed territories by the Great Powers (Lenin 125).

The other highlighted point that Lenin makes for the forthcoming analysis is about the reaction to imperialism, how it will be repressed, as mentioned earlier, and how social democracy will try to use the reaction to reform imperialism instead of trying to end it.

The solution given by Lenin, in 1916, to the imminent imperialism is the creation of a Revolutionary Party which can transform the imperialist wars into civil wars to create a Socialist State which can emancipate and break free from this net of capitalist relations.

3.1.3 Arendt's approach

For this last approach to the thesis will deal with Hannah Arendt's first chapter of the second part of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, "The Political Emancipation of the Bourgeoisie", where Arendt argues that at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, imperialism was the consequence of two conflicting logics: that of the geographically bounded nation-state, and that of the unlimited expansion of the capitalist economy.

According to Arendt, imperialism spans from 1884 until 1914, during which many features of the 19th century ended. This imperialism has clear similarities to later totalitarianisms. In a way, it can be seen as a groundwork for later totalitarianism, but it has relative tranquility and allegedly innocence to later catastrophes. What differentiates imperialism from earlier eras is what Arendt refers to as "political emancipation of the bourgeoisie" (123). Any social class was able to replace the aristocracy after the French Revolution as the ruling class; however, the bourgeoisie attained economic pre-eminence without being the ruling class, which led to imperialism.

Imperialism was a response to the nation-state crisis that emerged with the class of the political and economic powers. The economic crisis was the overproduction of capital which needed an outlet, and the mass unemployment. The political crisis, followed from the economic crisis, was the political emancipation of the bourgeoisie mentioned earlier, which began to act politically in order to export their capital as a solution to the limitations of the nation-state.

This capital is exported to the colonies, but not the law. This is the primary difference between colonialism and this new form of imperial expansion. The conquest exports the national institutions and law, but expansion has no interest in establishing a home government abroad.

Therefore, we can conclude that according to Arendt, there are four essential features in imperialism:

1. It is sustained under conflict between the stable setting of the juridic-political institutions, held by the reminiscent aristocracy, in the territory and the economic power, held by the bourgeoisie.
2. The inherent contradiction between these logics can only be solved through geographical expansion.
3. The base of this geographical expansion is to export the capital and the economy but not the law and the institutions.
4. The bourgeoisie gain a political emancipation through expanding their power away from the limitation of the borders of the nation.

4. Definition of Imperialism

In order to perform an analysis of the United States' intervention in Afghanistan it is needed a definition of imperialism based on the different approaches that have been chosen for this paper, John Hobson's, Vladimir Lenin's and Hannah Arendt's.

The three of them have been selected due to their different approaches to the same topic, the different times when these studies were published, being Hobson's previous to World War I, Lenin's during the World War, and Arendt's post-World War II. The first approach, Hobson's attempts to explain from a liberal point of view; it is really interesting this approach because it is from 1902, previous to the First World War, it mainly focuses on the economic aspects of imperialism. The second one is Vladimir Lenin's work from 19, which is highly interesting since it is influenced by Hobson's work, however, he is adding a political dimension and taking Hobson's arguments one step further, stating that imperialism is not just an expansive phase, but a new stage of capitalism. The last one is Arendt's, it is the last written of these three approaches, and she states that imperialism is a period already closed with the end of the First World War, however, these events from the imperialistic stage that Arendt's defines can explain the attitudes of the nations in these Cold War period.

Before delving into the documentary analysis, it is necessary to clarify the definitions of the three approaches based on the previous theoretical framework and to attempt to provide a proper definition of imperialism for the upcoming analysis.

4.1.1 Hobson's definition

Hobson's work, *Imperialism: A Study* dates from 1902, and it is an economical critique of the political and economic politics of the Great Powers of the beginning of the twentieth century and how they needed to expand their markets for their surplus in their production. Afterwards, he proposes an alternative to imperialism for the bourgeoisie to reinvert that surplus capital in their own nation instead of in territorial expansion.

The chapter chosen is the fifth, titled "The Economic Taproot of Imperialism," and a definition could be developed based on what has been summarized in the theoretical framework: imperialism is the economic need in the capitalist nations to find new markets

overseas for their excess of capital, creating commercial relations of dependency with the bigger nation, and using the natural resources on militarism, and warlike diplomacy, in order to find markets for the good and surplus capital.

4.1.2 Lenin's definition

Regarding Vladimir Lenin's approach to imperialism, it is consistent with Hobson's ideas. However, he differs in an essential part of the definition of imperialism. While Hobson treats imperialism as a deviation of capitalism, Lenin states that this behavior is not a deviation, but inherent to the capitalist system. Therefore, he entitles this study as "the highest stage of capitalism". Taking into account the five stages of imperialism that has been explained earlier, he basically explains that capitalism had reached a monopolistic stage where the richest capitalist oligarchy is expanding their frontiers and using the nation to defend their own interest.

Regarding the definition, in pages 92 and 93 the author gives a brief own definition of what he considers imperialism which could be summarized as: the monopoly stage of capitalism that has transcended the colonial policy due to the monopolist industry and capital from the banks, which lead to a virtual possession of the territory by the relations of the capital that all people are subdued.

4.1.3 Arendt's definition

Hannah Arendt's approach to imperialism is found in the second part of her 1951 book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in the second part of the study, where she argues about what she calls "the political emancipation of the bourgeoisie". This approach is remarkably different from the previous ones, even though Arendt shares similar points of views with the other authors.

For Arendt, imperialism encompasses from 1884 until 1914, but the main point that she makes regarding this is that its origin is the clash between the old aristocracy which holds the political power with the bourgeoisie, which holds the economic power.

The bourgeoisie tries to gain power over territories abroad. The author names this process “the political emancipation of the bourgeoisie”.

As a result, Arendt defines imperialism as a historical event that occurred between 1884 and 1914, as the result of a clash between the political power held by the aristocracy and the economic power held by the bourgeoisie. This would result in geographical expansions looking for new markets to increase their capital without the boundaries of their juridical institutions from their nation. She contends, however, that the accumulation of power and capital will result in modern racism and totalitarianism.

4.1.4 Own definition

The previous definitions were used to arrive at my own definition. The three approaches are complementary, particularly the first two. However, personally, I do not believe that imperialism was a closed stage in history that ended in 1914, because interventionist policies were common throughout the second half of the twentieth century, and these interventionist policies were motivated by capitalist interests. Furthermore, rather than being a deviation, imperialism can be argued to be inherent to capitalism in its need to expand its markets. As a result, imperialism can be defined as Great Power interventionist policies in strategic territories for economic reasons, without taking formal control of their institutions and instead creating economic dependency on the larger nation. Using military and aggressive diplomacy to achieve their political interests in the intervened country, the origin of this policy is the political emancipation of the bourgeoisie.

5. Analysis of the documentary

In order to perform this analysis, it needs to be highlighted that the main premise of the documentary is that “nothing makes sense anymore”, as Curtis is heard in the beginning of his narration. The analysis that is going to be performed may be complex since it is a conflict that has become blurred, and many different sides took part in it. Several actors played a crucial role in the development of this conflict, as it can be seen in the summary part, but the main one for the purpose of this paper are the United States and the several interventions in the territory, and, in a secondary way, the Soviet Union, without whom America’s actions cannot be fully understood.

Regarding Soviet and United States’ expansionism, following Lenin’s theory of imperialism, the major capitalist powers plunged into two catastrophic wars all around the globe. However, after the Second World War, the structure of global politics changed politically and economically from a multi-polar perspective towards a bipolar one. Two rival countries and their global military alliances began a silent confrontation on the territorial peripheries, but there was no war between the major powers.

The analysis of the documentary will be focused on three different parts: first, one since 1945 meeting until 1973’s coup arranged by Mohammed Daoud and its implications; the second one deals with 1978’s revolution; and the last one targets the period after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the takeover of the fundamentalist in Afghanistan.

5.11 First part: Suez meeting until 1978

The beginning of the documentary talks about the Suez meeting in 1945 at the Bitter Lake between Franklin D. Roosevelt and the King of Saudi Arabia, Abudalizizz Ibn Saud, where they reach an economical agreement for the United States’ enterprises and the construction of dams and the sale of technology in exchange for natural resources and, what is more important, “to leave their faith untouched”. This last sentence is a clear statement that this is not a mere commercial exchange but an intervention policy since the actors of the exchange are politically responsible and not the enterprises and there is

a political motive behind it. For the United States, this political motive is to hold Russia's expansion in the Middle East and for Saudi Arabia is to gain the needed technology without losing political influence over their faith or institution, while the real beneficiaries economically would be the enterprises involved.

Further ahead, in what can be considered as the first stage, the American project was to create a Western Democracy in Afghanistan, based on the economic relations with them. As we had already mentioned the main part of the project was the construction of dams, which the Afghan President would use in their own interest for religious purposes. However, this attempt to make Afghanistan more similar to a Western country was not merely naive or focused on the economical aspect; it followed a political agenda against the Soviet expansion towards the Middle East.

Moving forward, there was an inflection point in 1973, after the coup by Mohammed Daoud, Prime Minister of Afghanistan which brought the American sought democracy to Afghanistan. However, in the documentary, it is explained that when the Middle East War started, the entire financial system broke free from political control, which led to the appearance of the speculative system, with the bankers as the main axis of this new financial system. This major event has to be understood under the perception of what we have called imperialism: in a way it is the major point of emancipation of the economical class, the bourgeoisie, from their politics, as Arendt predicted. It is a culmination of the process started in the 19th century of the domination of the world by the capitalist monopolies and banks, whom from that point until nowadays had continued ruling indirectly the world without taking formal control over the institutions. The capitalist relations created by this new financial system made all of the Western territories submit to this new regime, exactly as Lenin predicted.

Therefore, we can conclude that as it was predicted by the three different approaches there had been an imperialist approach towards the territory in Afghanistan, and not a mere economical exchange, and as Hobson states in his taproot of imperialism, the United States tries to control informally the countries and creating new markets. However, according to Hobson's approach this might not be considered as imperialism as such since there is a political underlying condition which is the fight against

communism that might be considered as more important as the mere opening of new markets for their production surplus.

5.2 Second part: 1978's revolution until 1991

The second part of the analysis is set after the 1978 revolution by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, a communist organization that established a revolutionary government that intended to build a socialist country and to redistribute the land. This reaction against the United State's economical intervention and 1973's coup is the exact archetype of what Lenin writes as solution to the imperialist wars, which is to create a revolutionary organization that converts the imperialist interventions into civil wars to create a Socialist State. However, the internal fights between both leaders of the party ended with the death of Taraki, one of them and with the Soviet forces taking over Afghanistan with military forces and ending up with the other communist leader, Amin, as well, and controlling the country politically.

Meanwhile, the United States, according to the documentary, used the CIA to train Islamic fundamentalists to fight the communist invaders for their religion. According to this we can clearly see a pattern of both countries seeking the monopoly of the economic development of the country but, in the case of the United States, not a direct interaction with the country's politics, at least in the case of Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, in this first stage. These attitudes follow every aspect that we have used in the theoretical framework to define imperialism, even Arendt's definition, which can be more unclear, but she states that the nations were exporting their economy and their economic ruling class but without taking over the political institutions of the country. Therefore, the United States was trying in this first stage to export their capital and economic control over Afghanistan leading them into a democracy without formal control of the country, which is a clear example of how we have defined imperialism as the interventionist policies of Great Powers in strategic territories for economic reasons without taking formal control of their institutions but creating economic dependency to the greater nation. However, in the second stage we can see that what the Soviet Union is doing is significantly similar to what the United States is doing, and it can follow Lenin's arguments regarding how the

imperialist powers do not take political control of the country, but they have the hegemony of violence, which is what happened when the Soviet military invaded Afghanistan.

5.3 Third part: Soviet collapse in 1991 until 2013

After 1991, the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics disbanded. With The collapse of the Soviet bloc at the end of the 1980s, the structure of the global system changed again. The U.S. emerged as the world's only superpower, increasingly prepared to use its massive military superiority to maintain its position of global dominance and to prevent the emergence of serious rivals anywhere in the world.

However, the situation in Afghanistan dramatically changed when the rebels trained by the CIA took control of the country and destroyed the capital and turned against the United States for being a “corrupted Western country”, as they are described in the documentary. Therefore, the United States military invaded the country after 9/11 and tried to implement, once again, a Western democracy, which would fail due to the corruption created after the amount of economic, political and military interventions that the country had suffered since the 1950s.

It is interesting that the rigged elections and corruption are an essential part of this period of time of the American invasion of Afghanistan, which, once again, follows Lenin’s theory in what he calls inherent “corruption and bribery of the oppressed territories” (Lenin 125). The warlords that had the control of the drugs, through the United States’ military intervention obtained the legal framework that they needed to raise as the legislative power as well, as it is mentioned in the documentary. Moreover, these warlords were so powerful that they could manipulate Presidential Elections, and they had the total control of the police. As Arendt’s theory explains in complementation with Lenin’s explanation, this is due to imperialism, where, as part of the political emancipation of the bourgeoisie, the economic forces will export their resources and capital, but not their juridic institutions.

It is remarkable to clarify that this happens in this period and not in the Soviet one because in the Socialist Afghanistan there were not democratic elections, which does not

mean that there was not political corruption, it is just not encompassed in the documentary.

The war with the fundamentalists continued and the corruption was out of control and the British and the Americans gave up on Afghanistan, at the same time that the 2008 crisis started. This part is interesting because it is a clear continuation of Hobson's economic analysis of how imperialism ethics works. The documentary states that the government instead of reinforcing the system of the nation were just giving away billions of dollars into the banks and the market which resulted into a bigger crisis, following his statement that this imperialist system had nothing to do with the nation, but with the capitalist oligarchy, as he premonitorily wrote in 1902.

Moreover, it is interesting to talk about the study "Costs of War" by the University of Brown that estimates the spendings in the War in Afghanistan to be over 14 trillion dollars, which has been divided between a few enterprises, such as Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, General Dynamics and Boeing. This same paper estimates that between 31 and 60 billion dollars had been frauded by the Afghans, which gives even more credit to both Hobson and Lenin's economic approaches to imperialism as a way of opening new markets for the capitalist oligarchies, not only banks, but in this case, military lobby enterprises.

The end of the documentary dates to 2013, when Afghanistan democracy and economy collapsed, leading to what would be later called as the Islamic State, with a reflection of how there has never been quite a simple story of good versus evil but a more complex story that none of us can completely understand. However, after analyzing these events with the different approaches we can see that most of these events can be explained following the definition of imperialism that we had given in the first part of the analysis.

6. Conclusions

Having carried out an exhaustive analysis of the stages and phases of the documentary *The Bitter Lake* (2015) with the approaches to imperialism given by John A. Hobson, Vladimir “Lenin” and Hannah Arendt, we can extract the following conclusions regarding the way the American presence in Afghanistan has been an imperialist intervention.

In general, the United States had followed every single feature described as imperialism in the definition that we have given in the beginning of the analysis. In the case of Hobson’s *Imperialism: A Study* (1902), the attempt to control the country with the economical dependency from the United States, it was never a mere commercial agreement between countries, selling their surplus capital in a new market, which was the Afghan territory at first, and later on, the proper American and Afghan governments through the weapons lobbies. Moreover, the usage of aggressive diplomacy and the indirect military interventions are part of Hobson’s statements from his work. The need for territorial expansion to stop the other Great Power’s expansion in that territory can be highlighted as well.

In the American intervention, Vladimir Lenin’s theses mentioned in *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916) can be traced as well including the ones regarding how the financial system would be fundamental for the world division and how the capitalist relations will subjugate the governments and the oppressed territories. Moreover, not only in the economic section, but in the political, when he describes the monopoly of the violence by the oppressing nation and the inherent corruption that would come from this virtual control of the countries. And, at last, in how the reaction against imperialism should be the creation of a Revolutionary Party and how the oppressing nation would try to military defeat the revolution using the monopoly of violence. Ironically, the nation that took down the revolution was the Soviet Union themselves.

Similarly, Arendt’s points regarding the political emancipation of the bourgeoisie, and how the boundaries of the political control from the nation clashes with the aim for unlimited expansion of the capitalist logic, as offered in her *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), were applied to theorize the United States’ operations. Especially, in the first stage of the United States’ intervention, where the Americans exported their

economy but not their institutions to Afghanistan, it can be seen that is the exact definition of what Arendt was stating in her analysis. Therefore, we can conclude that it has been found out that, according to this paper, imperialism period continued after World War I as part of capitalism's need for geographical expansion.

Moreover, it is remarkable to see how the Soviet Union behaved in an imperialist way towards the territory of Afghanistan, regarding the military invasion and the indirect control of the country and making the country dependent on them. However, this is not the same kind of imperialism as the United States', which drove me to title the Soviet imperialism as "social imperialism" since they did not seek economic revenue for their capitalist oligarchy, but merely geographical.

Taking all of this into account we can conclude that the United States intervention followed all of the features defined in the theoretical framework and matches with the definitions of imperialism by the authors and the one given by myself, characterized as not only an economical or geographical move, but a more complex and modern form of domination of the territory, which is imperialism. Nevertheless, the Afghan conflict is a deeper issue that may have transcended imperialism, since its outcomes, especially regarding the problematic created by the United States with the Islamic fundamentalists have blurred away the original meaning of what happened in the territory throughout these several decades. Adam Curtis's documentary is remarkable in its depiction and didacticism of such a complex topic as Afghanistan, one of the world's longest military conflicts. The use of the raw bellicose footage mixed with sudden images of everyday life, and how Curtis explains one by one every event that happened that affected the Afghan conflict, such as it was the Bitter Lake meeting, made this analysis affordable, as well as inducing the viewer a critical opinion against all of the intervening factions in the territory.

To sum up, the US intervention in Afghanistan was an imperialist action that incorporated all of the characteristics of the three approaches chosen, and it was not merely a territorial invasion or an economic exchange, as I have defined. Afghanistan's territory was a victim of a larger conflict between the two major imperialist powers of the second half of the twentieth century, American imperialism and what the Soviet Union referred to as "social imperialism," the consequences of which are still felt today.

Furthermore, this analysis would not have been possible without Adam Curtis' outstanding overview of Afghanistan's history in the second half of the twentieth century.

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