

Topic Page: [Imperialism](#)

Definition: **imperialism** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

Domination of one people or state by another. Imperialism can be economic, cultural, political or religious. From the 16th century, trading empires were set up by major European powers such as the British, Spanish, French, Portuguese and Dutch. They penetrated Africa, Asia and N America, their colonies serving as a source of raw materials and a market for manufactured goods. Imperialism often imposed alien cultures on native societies. See *also* colonialism

Summary Article: **Imperialism**

From *A New A-Z of International Relations Theory*

Imperialism is a form of relationship characterized by conquest, expansion, domination and subjugation. It is a term which represents the interests and actions of some **actors**, and the relationships between these centres of **power** and **authority** with other actors. The latter are integrated into the spheres of influence or imperial domains of the imperial powers. In IR the term is most commonly used to refer to the period of human **history** where international relations were largely dominated by **empires** and **conflict** over **resources**. The study of imperialism is often focused on by theories dealing with the study of conflict, the spread of capitalism and contemporary **development** issues.

Some scholars, such as Niall Ferguson (2004), argue that imperialism was (and potentially still is) necessary in order for the modern world system to emerge out of disintegrated pre-industrial economic systems. In short, imperialism helped to spread the capitalist world system, increase global economic development, encourage technological and industrial **progress**, and usher in **modernity**. This is, however, a contested viewpoint, and imperialism has been seen to be far less of a necessary or desired process by **Marxists** and **structuralists**. **Vladimir Lenin** (1870–1924) argued that imperialism was the highest form of capitalism, and was the means to preserve the capitalist system. Lenin, and later Marxists, claimed that while the capitalist system was decaying in Europe due to the inherent contradictions found within it, capitalists found new **markets** to sell their excess goods in, import raw materials from, and exploit **labour** in. These markets were the non-European realms and once integrated into the capitalist system they allowed some measure of development and economic justice in Europe while maintaining the capitalist system of competition, exploitation and accumulation. In this way, therefore, critical theorists have seen imperialism as a policy initiated by the bourgeoisie with the goal of maintaining their position. Imperialism was thus something to be resisted.

Contemporary scholars argue that imperialism is not a stage of human history that has passed. Instead, theorists such as Raúl Prebisch (1950) argue that a form of neo-imperialism exists where the same processes of dominance, subjugation, exploitation and control are still present. Prebisch sees the modern world economy as being divided up into zones (which are not necessarily geographically delineated as contiguous territories), and relationships between capitalistic entities and markets for labour, imports and exports. The rich entities can include states, but it is more common to view actors such as **MNCs** as the real centres of power; and underdeveloped markets and societies as the subjugated peripheries. The relationship between these centres of power and their 'domains' is one of dependency where the poor are inescapably reliant on the rich. This form of neo-imperialism has been explored in dependency **theory**.

Immanuel Wallerstein (1974, 1980, 1989) has developed another interpretation of neo-imperialism, claiming that the world is split into three zones: the core, the semi-periphery and the periphery. Here, the core or centre of power exploits the other zones. This approach has been termed 'modern world system theory'. The implicit relationships characteristic of overt imperialism and political control still exist in the modern world system and have been embedded into its structure. Thus, overt imperialism is no longer necessary but to all intents and purposes imperialism as an economic (and political) relationship still exists. Regardless of the reality of imperialism in the contemporary world, the term is often used in political discourse as negative. Revisionist leaders (and former leaders), such as Fidel Castro (Cuba), Hugo Chávez (Venezuela) and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (Iran), often refer to US foreign policy as grand imperial design bent on world domination so as to garner support for their own policies and delegitimize those of the USA. Even in discourse taking place within **status quo** states such as the United States and Britain, the term imperialism is seen as a form of political and economic organization which has rightly been relegated to the past, even though relationships and policies rooted in the era of European **empires** remain today. Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) offers a good discussion of developments in European imperial discourse and **narratives**.

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Imperialism. (2014). In L. Pettiford (Ed.), *A new A-Z of international relations theory*. London, UK: I.B. Tauris. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/imperialism>



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"Imperialism." *A New A-Z of International Relations Theory*, edited by Lloyd Pettiford, I.B. Tauris, 1st edition, 2014. *Credo Reference*, <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/imperialism>. Accessed 20 Oct. 2019.