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Former US defense secretary Ash Carter speaks with members of the Defense Innovation Board during the board's first public meeting at Pentagon in Washington, D.C., on October 5, 2016.

est business partners of Big Tech, which in turn exerts a strong influence within the US government and the World Trade Organization. It is also important to know that Big Tech executives take active part in (semi)public channels such as the Defense Innovation Board, the Network Centric Operations Industry Consortium, and the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence. As such, they are placed in a strong position to influence government policies through public-private partnerships for mass surveillance and tech wars against potential US rivals such as China, Russia, and Iran.

■ ■ **What lessons can we draw from the recent pandemic, and the global scramble to contain it, about imperialism in the 21st century?**

We could draw at least three main lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic as they relate to the issue of imperialism. The first is about the economic dynamics of imperialism. The pandemic provided an historic opportunity to amplify the power of Western-based Big Tech companies, which witnessed a tremendous increase in their profits in the pandemic era. These companies also led an unprecedented cycle of social media censorship under the pretext of curbing pandemic-related misinformation, particularly against social media outlets from leading Eurasian countries such as Russia, China, and Iran. Therefore, the first lesson to draw: we should be vigilant against the rise of Western-based ICT monopolies and social media discrimination in the pandemic era. This also brings us to our second lesson, which relates to the geopolitical dynamics of imperialism. To me it seems that imperialist countries have taken advantage of this pandemic to intensify their aggression towards the developing world, especially when it comes to countries such as Iran, Cuba, China, and Russia. The pandemic has already destabilized the economies of many developing countries. Under these circumstances, imperialist countries hoped to amplify these negative effects through sanctions and other coercive means. Sanctions have restricted Iran and Cuba's access to medical materials and equipment.

It gave me great pain to observe how the international community has failed completely to denounce these unjust sanctions in the name of humanity. In Cuba, moreover, COVID-related grievances helped to trigger mass protests. Similarly, economic deterioration due to the pandemic conditions facilitated the failed attempt of a Western-backed color revolution in Kazakhstan. Furthermore, Russia is facing increased NATO aggression in Ukraine and neighbouring regions amidst grave economic difficulties caused by a combination of the pandemic and Western sanctions. In the meantime, the US attempts to weaponize the pandemic by scapegoating China and accelerating its trade war on the Chinese economy.



David Ryder (Getty Images)

The exterior of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is seen on May 4, 2021 in Seattle, Washington.

The third lesson to draw is to be vigilant about “medical imperialism” in the COVID-19 era. This era witnessed the intensification of a global competition for producing national vaccines and acquiring medical materials and equipment used to fight the pandemic, with imperialist economies being able to outspend them and limiting the medical access of lower-income countries. The pandemic era has also exposed the absurdity of the Western-dominated intellectual property rights regime, whose medical aspects are monopolized by Big Pharma at the expense of the developing countries. Unfortunately, the international community has completely failed to support international cooperation for the fight against the pandemic, while the United States attempted to undermine the World Health Organization's prestige. Instead, philanthrocapitalists, who represent Big Tech (e.g. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation), took the lead in promoting privatized healthcare systems.

■ ■ **Finally, on a more theoretical level: Culture may not be as independent a variable as theorists of the “cultural turn” argued or wished it to be, but it doesn't seem to be a wholly dependent variable which can be explained away by economic and political forces, either. Don't we need to recognize a certain degree of autonomy for culture?**

The answer to that question lies in two common fallacies that have plagued social theory for a very long time. The first concerns what came to be known as “economic reductionism”, or the mistake of reducing every social phenomenon to economic factors. Certainly, economic conditions provide a basic foundation from which our political and cultural practices can flourish. Let me share a relevant quote from one of my favorite thinkers: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances”. What we can take from this quote is that ideas do certainly matter, but their reach is somewhat limited by our material conditions. At the risk of oversimplification, carrying out an industrial revolution in the Middle Ages would be inconceivable given the under-developed state of the productive forces.

It is commonplace to claim that a society's level of economic development is a basic –albeit not comprehensive– criterion for its level of political and cultural sophistication. At a certain stage of their development, however, economic forces may also act as a source of oppression and other injustices beyond the control of individuals. This points to a situation in which social forces exert an absolute control over the individual. A perfect case in point is how money and technology have managed to enslave the entire humanity. We have so far failed to resolve the most pressing problems of poverty, hunger, and war, even though we are already equipped with the technological and economic means to terminate many of these problems once and for all. This is where the role of political and cultural forces comes in, with their provision of the necessary moral and intellectual fuel to put an end to such forms of alienation. At this point, I think, critical social theories assume a key responsibility to devise the means for reclaiming the autonomy of culture and liberate society.

The second fallacy that is commonly found in social theory is what we call “cultural reductionism”, or the mistake of attributing every social phenomenon merely to cultural factors. This is a common mistake that critical theories often fall into, including some variants of postmodernism and poststructuralism. There are times where emancipatory thinking can fall victim to some form of voluntaristic fideism at the expense of losing its sense of reality and practical significance.

Perhaps the first and most important step in overcoming such fallacies is to acknowledge the mutually reinforcing relationship between economic and political forces, while constantly seeking ways to set ourselves free from the chains of our own making through faith and science. In 'Imperialism after the Neoliberal Turn', I have attempted to take this very first step by studying the geopolitical, economic, and cultural dynamics of imperialism in tandem.