

Imperialist reconstruction or depopulation in Syria and Iraq

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Post-war reconstruction carries different meanings in different contexts: Arab reconstruction institutionalizes divisive identities standing above the state whose aim is to dismantle any political form of organisation that may potentially further working class unity, while East Asian reconstruction rebuilds industry and a state that is an institution of all institutions. The war stricken economies of the Arab world contribute to imperial rents via the domain of militarism (Luxemburg 1913), while the advanced economies of Northeast Asia super-exploit their periphery and serve as a cordon sanitaire furthering US-led imperialist hegemony. At face value, there is not much novelty in such a proposition: empires across history rebuild or deconstruct in line with their interests. What is new is that forms of chattel slavery never ceased to exist and imperialism drives the making of the historical surplus value via commercial exploitation or the partial or total enslavement of whole countries (Abdel-Malek 1981; Emmanuel 1972). Slavery, which was the ‘pedestal’² upon which stood European capitalism and wage-slavery, is still around in new and different forms because the crisis of capital continues to deepen. Collapsing states, states whose peoples have been stripped of the right to own their resources, or states deprived of their popular sovereignty are *en masse* examples of partial or relative forms of de-subjection or slavery.

As Naqib (2017) observes: ‘All the literature on Arab post-conflict reconstruction has one and only one purpose, which is to divert attention from the ongoing conflict and to occupy the minds with hallucinations; it should be exposed for what it is.’³ The distinguished Palestinian scholar bases his affirmation on his long-time study of aid to the occupied West Bank and Gaza, spaces where aid to alleviate the damage to the local economy inflicted by Israeli bombardment or colonial economic asphyxiation has the boomerang effect of rewarding Israel for the very damages it actually inflicts. Since nearly all the material equipment and incremental increase in money supply required for reconstruction by the occupied territories must originate or pass through Israel, the economic performance of the Israeli economy improves by the degree it damages the occupied territories. This cycle of ‘occupy or bomb and earn immediate dollars’ for the damages you perpetrate applies to broader areas forcibly/financially integrated with the global economy by means of imperialist war of aggression.

Compared to the imperialistically induced Northeast Asian reconstruction experience, the word ‘reconstruction’ assumes a polysemous character when thought of in an Arab context. US aid to post-war South Korea was so significant that Moon and Park (2003, 80) unequivocally stated ‘were it not for American bilateral aid, South Korea would have never recovered.’ The authors extolled the initial high level of bilateral aid amounting to more than 10 percent of GDP and other legitimising measures and financial assistance conducted through the *United Nations Korean Reconstruction Agency* (UNKRA), which incidentally was mostly US-funded as well. But what is significant in that course of events are not the numbers themselves, but the degree of autonomy afforded to the South Korean authorities, including the oddity of allowing them the luxury of land reform bridging income

¹ This article draws from my forthcoming work: *The Cordon Sanitaire: A single law governing development in East Asia and the Arab World*, Palgrave, 2017. <http://www.palgrave.com/la/book/9789811048210>

² The pedestal is used here in reference to Marx’s remark in the chapter on the Genesis of Industrial capital in Vol. I (1867): ‘The veiled slavery of the wage workers in Europe needed, for its pedestal, slavery, pure and simple.’ The ‘pedestal’ that was slavery never stopped at the point of the abolition of formal slavery. It assumes manifold new forms on a much grander scale.

³ Discussion with Fadle Naqib, professor emeritus at Waterloo University.

inequality, and the meticulousness with which the US followed up on implementation of the reconstruction plans.

In contrast, the recent reconstruction efforts of the AW further deconstructed the state and the unity arising from national identity forming around the state. To begin with, the wars in the war-afflicted Arab countries never fully halted to allow a genuine rebuilding process. In an Arab context, the reconstruction effort was a measure to promote the objectives of imperialism in setting the background for continued war and/or the dissolution of the development achievements that would have otherwise buttressed the future security of the state and society. The relationship of war to politics as it transmutes into the act of reconstruction is a continuation of the politics of war by means of reconstruction, to coin a phrase from Clausewitz. In Bassford (1994), for instance, reference is made to General Grant's take on Clausewitz as who opposed land redistribution to black people, which never happened because of the President, Andrew Johnson, who was a Southerner: 'Reconstruction was in some sense a continuation of the struggle to achieve through political means the aims for which the war (the American civil war) was fought.' Concerning more recent Arab reconstruction, Jacoby (2007) concludes that 'the hegemony uses post-war reconstruction processes as an opportunity to preserve and extend an international order friendly to its principles, its security and its prosperity.'

Arab Wars or East Asian Super-Exploitation?

Which is better for US empire, the super-exploitation of Asian sweatshops or the commercial exploitation via wars in the Arab world? On the face of it, US capital spends trillions on wars in the Middle East, bombing impoverished countries whose whole incomes (GDPs) put together would not amount to the yearly income of a mid-sized city in the United States. Meanwhile, outsourcing jobs and investment to Third World sweatshops results in huge revenues to capital determined by the difference between the puny payment to Third World labour versus the huge revenues from final sale-points in the Western hemisphere (West, North, South are ideological descriptors, so northern classes have allies in the southern hemisphere, etc.). The newly elected American President (Trump) has said that America gained little out of liberating Iraq, and that Americans should have a stake in Iraqi oil.⁴ Not only in relation to the Iraq war, but to a whole history of colonial pillage, the Eurocentric left adopts Trump-like two-entry bookkeeping measure of imperialist war costs relative to tribute or loot from devastated developing formations.

Even Foster et al. (2008) re-uphold the position that US military spending soaks up the US's vast economic surplus to stave off economic stagnation without emphasising devalorisation by commercial exploitation - of which depopulation is the foremost practice - and the primacy of politics. The commercial exploitation I refer to here follows from capital, the metabolic order consuming man and nature, of which in more concrete terms the industry of slaughter by imperialist wars and enslavement reduces prices way below value and generates new value especially as a result of annihilating segments of the global reserve army of labour - the macabre industry producing surplus value by regulating the supply of labour power as a result of consuming human lives. The production of value by the outright consumption of human lives is a perennial trait of capital.

Coincidentally, realising the surplus as cause for militarism is the very position for which Karl Niebyl (no date) criticised Baran and Sweezy (1975) for being too pragmatic. Emphasising wars of aggression only in terms of how the money form amassed in excess central profits induces more wars, as opposed to how war acts socially to discipline the global labour process (war as law of value), or how engaging in wars may just function to cement capital's rule (the primacy of politics), assuming that the symptom of monopoly capital in high profits is itself the determining relationship of war making. There will only be lame social theory without a theory of value and the point that cannot be

⁴ 'They want the Iraqis to pay for that?': Trump's comments about Iraq's oil are stirring backlash'

<http://www.businessinsider.com/ap-trumps-talk-of-keeping-iraqs-oil-sparking-concerns-2017-1?IR=T&r=US&IR=T>

reached by means of measurement (the knack for empirical pragmatism) is that pre-empting labour's revolutionary ideology is capital (the social relationship) at work; while the internal contradiction remains that by intensifying labour's misery through wars of aggression and absolute surplus value drainage, capital also weakens itself. There is a historical agency, capital, enmeshed in contradictions, which reproduces society at its own private terms, or terms that necessarily include the production of waste, which generates a tendency of auto-implosion in which labour arises as the alternative irrespective of the size of its moneyed value share. Capital inherently weakens its accumulation side by the realisation of civilian-end commodities (growing demand), while its reliance on accumulation by militarism (waste) can only lead to more of the prevailing barbarism, possibly a nuclear winter, or to socialism (Luxemburg, 1913).

Anecdotally, if all imperialist wars do is soak up the surplus, and not draw much of a surplus from the exploitation of the Third World, then Africans and Arabs should be very thankful that their slavery and colonial slaughter only contributes a puny amount to the empire, otherwise none of them would have been left alive. Imperialist wars of encroachment capture, realise and under-value real human and physical value in the Third World. Wars of encroachment are a form of production and a form of class struggle at the same time. Moreover, the practice of war as the instantiation of the law of value, or the practice of labour regimentation *cum* reproduction by violent means, moulds the social conditions necessary for the reproduction of capital itself as a central social relationship, and hence, it is the primary cause of surplus value.

The creation of surplus value occurs in an integrated global production process. As Emmanuel (1972) had already pointed out, limiting production to imaginary national boundaries is a false abstraction and the search for the formation of international value and the transfers of wealth from one country to another are hidden in the structure of that value. The process of making the social and ideological context for the reproduction of the labourer by means of imperialist wars, a sort of department zero in a simple Marxian reproduction schema, a department without which society will be no more, is where the initial surplus value is made. It is where the production of labour power, the social value that goes into bringing people to life, rearing them and or extinguishing their lives prematurely, which makes for a primal factory that extends itself across the globe.

The political economic dimension that is often overlooked here is that unlike pre-capitalist modes, the tribute to capitalist empires occurs chiefly through unnecessarily-mystified financial channels under permanent crises of overproduction. In pre-capitalist phases of history, it was pertinent for empires that grew with low levels of development in the productive forces (constant or decreasing scale technologies) to build and maintain human life in order to reap higher tribute – the healthier and more numerous the peasants, the higher the output or social product. What distinguishes capitalism is that in the pursuit of profits, more commodities are produced with improved technology and fewer people, and many resources, including people, should objectively become redundant. The degree of redundancy is determined against the power balances of the class struggle and the production of waste. Militarism and wars, more generally waste, are not just another industry; they are a domain of accumulation or a complete self-propelling social order. The creation of wealth or more surplus labour requires waste and 'minus labour' (the reserve army of labour is purely a capitalistic construct and minus labour is Marx's way of positing the opposite of surplus labour, Marx [1857]). Marx (1857) also adds that the increase of the population itself (*changes in population*) is the chief means for reducing the necessary part of labour. Although these points may require further elaboration, one issue remains relevant to the question posed earlier and that is: in the monopoly age, wars of depopulation must be investigated as part and parcel of the *rapport de force* of the class struggle that serve the waste side of the capitalist economy, as well as the embryo of surplus value.

Capitalist overproduction, determined by an alienated moneyed-exchange process (independent of immediate social control), and involving a higher rate of metabolising man and nature, necessitates the reaping of rents from a surplus product that grows by destroying or setting aside resources – permanent wars and unemployment are protruding characteristics of capitalism. Hence, it is not imperialist securitisation extending hegemony alone that accounts for reconstruction or deconstruction

(in the literal sense); wars, through creating redundant resources and an increasing rate of denationalising or disengaging resources, cheapen the value of the labourer (human life), and more important, cheapen the wages paid for labour power (the commodity). It is in the concomitant consumption of the living labourer and his or her labour power, the highest degree of which occurs in wars, where the intensity of the contradiction pre-eminent in the value relationship, reaches new heights. The social product acquired by capital as surplus value consumes the private labourer as subject and object (labour and labour power). In war, the capitalist literally swallows the labourer.

To review: wars are the realisation stage of militarism, which is itself a domain of accumulation with all the ideological and institutional underpinnings for auto-reproduction – not just military Keynesianism. Apart from the realisation of the bomb-commodity, in wars, we also have another commodity, human life reduced to labour power, consumed to make another human life cheap by cheapening the price of labour power - a sedimentary stage of surplus value creation. As to physical productivity and profits priced in Western currency, one must think of those in terms of the difference between the direct producer, the price paid to consume the cheaper Arab or African lives relative to the price earned via militarism in the Western market or the final sellers. For the sake of perspicuity, I add that few speak of Arab and African lives in terms of commodities like coffee or cocoa, grown and paid for in low prices, but sold/realised for high prices by Western monopolies. In political economy parlance, in the totality that is capitalist production, the profit rate emerges as the mediated actuality of that most gruesome part of exploitation – the consummation of labour power in war, which is a form of commercial exploitation and a higher level in the commodification of human life than chattel slavery.

To return to our initial question: why deconstruct the Arab world and construct North-East Asia? The short answer is that by extinguishing lives far short of their historically determined life-expectancy, US-led capital and its militarism draw from wars higher rates of surplus value; at least on account of commodifying labour, the rate of commercial exploitation exceeds that of super-exploitation. The former form of exploitation principally characterises the Arab world, the latter form pertains to the exploitation of downstream sweatshop countries of East and South East Asia. Because the intensification of commercial exploitation founds the social background for higher profits, newer manifestations of slavery, as in the act of denationalising/destroying peripheral formations, would continue to form the ‘pedestals’ upon which the higher physical productivity of the North stands. Imperialist destruction of Arab states hijacks the will of people and reduces subject to object for whole nations just as if it were a massive form of slavery.

Another way of looking at this problem from the value relation side of things posits the following. Militarism and its wars ratchet up imperialist power and reduce the negotiating power of working classes and, by the same token, a wide range of prices that fall below value. With class struggle assuming the form of production and since war as a production process is also a manifestation of the class struggle, the consumption of human life directly in ‘war as production’ generates high rates of surplus value. The value relationship as such, the complex of contradictions between socially necessary labour time (the value proper that goes into forming the labourer), the labourer’s productivity (the use value of labour power) and the labourer’s labour power sale (its exchange value as in selling it for a wage) generates surplus value by the degree to which exchange value sinks way below the socially necessary labour time that produces the labourer. Wars, for instance, reap a whole life’s productivity in the short life expectancy of a fighter who is paid pittance in wages – including civilians who are paid zero or negative wages (starvation). All these people are willingly or unwillingly engaged in ‘war of production.’

It is not the higher sums of prices of products of capital-owned machinery, as opposed to Northern labour-owned, which demonstrate the higher surplus value of say an American worker, a worker defined by the mythical contours of nationality, especially as the US lays control to much of the world – control itself is a component of the production process. Prices as the mediated actuality of value via the balance of forces in the international class struggle and, within the class struggle as a production sphere itself, tally with the historically accumulated stock of imperialist power and camouflage real

value by the degree of labours' repression. Prices are constructed as fetishes by the ideological power of capital. They are demystified at the junction of proletarian revolution bringing them under social control. At each stage in history, the value that forms by imperialist wars adds to the stock of accumulated historical surplus value and, subsequently, the power, real and ideological, of central capital. Imperialist wars intensify capital, or the contradiction between the private and the social, which is the basis for higher rates of surplus value. The wars' ideological spinoffs, their capability in luring class consciousness away from class and closer to identity politics (rally around the flag), also assists in obscuring slavery with the fetishized prices that capital chooses to form.

In that line of argument as well, it is nonsensical to apply the dollar as unit of measure of Third World contribution to wealth (accumulated surplus value) when it is the product of five hundred years of accumulated colonial power, plunder, and historical surplus value. Pragmatic historians have reduced Marx to an accountant whose revolutionary theory is about making the value relationship tally with 'dollar' prices. Some such as Bairoch (1993) and Waites (1999) undervalue the contribution of the Third World to development by collapsing values into prices gauged in a currency existing outside power relations. Eurocentric Marxists go further in idealising imperialism by extolling the progress it imparts to Third World development (see Emmanuel's critique of Warren [1974]). Whereas humanity has been living its darkest ages since 1500 as the killing spree of European civilisation goes on unabated, European social democrats remind us that the only thing worse than being exploited by capitalism is not to be exploited by capitalism. The more appropriate term is not 'dark age' but 'white age.' Exploitation is limited in their eyes to clothing factories and not wars of extermination. No matter at what human cost, the surviving Indian-American or the Iraqi should rejoice at the possibility of taking an electrically heated/European-invented shower - invention is constructed as the unique product of the genius of that civilisation. If the price of progress is that of killing their children, then 'it was worth it,' as Albright said of Iraq's children dying under the sanctions. Unless one has tunnel vision, it is not difficult to spot the blatant racism in social democracy; however, it is the way Eurocentric Marxists - including their internationally cultivated labour aristocrats - managed to stick to unmediated forms of production and delink imperialist practice from the extended reproduction of capital, particularly the way it reproduces surplus value via militarism and depopulation that is quite astounding. Instead of capturing the revolutionary transformation of the working class into the proletariat, the latter term remained stuck in the category of the ever-shrinking numbers of industrial workers. Now, how could there be a revolution in Europe with diminishing industrial workers, when there was not a revolution during the heyday of industrialisation? Where European social being, rooted in colonial surplus usurpation via western democratisation serving as a safety valve for capital (bribe to northern working classes), was determining social consciousness, an esoteric form of western Marxism was reared by capital to de-prioritise the emancipation of the Third World. Not until the numbers of industrial workers in the South began to outstrip their northern counterparts that Northern Marxists began to speak of significant value transfers from the South to the North. The notion that Europe should lead the global Proletarian revolution because it has more factory workers is probably the most outstanding theoretical sham of the twentieth century.

Relating Third World value creation to the super-exploitation of Third World farmers or sweatshops without mention of the higher rates of surplus value wrought by commercial exploitation *qua* imperialist wars of depopulation is based on the false premise that production is only about the production of useful commodities and not waste or bombs. The bomb dropped on the Arab world consummates its own product cycle and consumes the Arab soldier/worker in that cycle. In Eurocentric optics however, wresting surplus value in the Third World is no longer the historically determined function of capital- imperialism alone falls outside the capital relationship. Imperialist practice is trans-historical, and empires invade and loot all the time, so why should the current practice be any different from past ones - including Greek or Roman. Imperialism becomes an inherent bent for violence that involves little or no surplus product creation, especially in the modern age where the empires' modern machines are physically 'more productive.' Absurdly, European empires are said to bear the economic and psychological 'burdens' for their costly mistakes of colonisation. It is as if 'primitive peoples' will do better to call upon Europe to reoccupy them and

determine how many of them should remain alive, and just maybe as well, Third-Worlders should ask the Europeans to stick around to organise the lives of those who remain alive after selective slaughter.

Hence, quantifying value/value relationships with dollar prices is not straightforward because, as mentioned above, prices are the class-power-brokered mediation of value in *actuality*, which means that the price system does not correspond in quantity to the value within the commodity and its qualitative aspect, the value relationship in any given order. Moreover, when that commodity is a bomb whose consumption is simultaneously production with multiple impacts, the departure of value from price in this category of waste-commodities is commensurate with the degree of social alienation or the degree of the stultification of the working class – the fetishism of commodities that allows things to exercise power over humans. The abstract value relationship transmuting into price of production in thought is a passage from the abstract to the concrete (subjective dialectics as per Ilyenkov [1961]), and it is a relationship that the human mind can construct. Actual prices, however, as the outward manifestation of the value relation in quantity, the mediated immediacy, the phenomenon as given to the senses, can only be perceived in thought as reduced averages or sums, which conceal their social content. Approximate *quantification* is not impossible, simply because it is approximate, but to measure how much ‘primitive man’ of the colonies or neo-colonies contributed to western wealth, we would have to include power-neutral intermediate prices and knowledge of the historical evolution of an immeasurable shadow price (real or power unpolluted price) of production. It is arduous but doable with much guess work. However, one can immediately spot that the price would have to include the historically rising power factor accruing to the dollar (privilege), the successor or the European currencies, as a result of the slaughter-based historical surplus value.

Even at the abstract stage of capitalist development, the stage at which value equals price, reducing the costs of necessary labour for the ‘shoemaker’ in Marx’s Capital Vol. requires a change in the mode of production. ‘But when surplus-value has to be produced by the conversion of necessary labour into surplus-labour, it by no means suffices for capital to take over the labour-process in the form under which it has been historically handed down, and then simply to prolong the duration of that process. The technical and social conditions of the process, *and consequently the very mode of production must be revolutionised* (my emphasis: Marx 1867). The owner of the shoe factory does not grow cheaper lettuce for the shoe-worker to reduce the necessary labour; it is the empire that revamps the mode of production. What better than wars of encroachment, the principal convulsions transforming the mode of production and enforcing a mode of commercial exploitation to reduce necessary labour? In one facet of that gruelling metabolic order of capital gelling as actuality, the value of commodity of the North (Europe) is the relative product of the high rate of consumption of human life in the South. Part of the socially necessary labour time (value) is wrought from the exercise of militarism and waste, which are mainly imperialist endeavours. The commodity itself as a genome of social development and as expanding value, mirrors the contradiction within itself or the value relation governing the commodity as self-expanding value (the value/exchange value contradiction), wherein value, in part, stems from the intensity of imperialist war regulating the reproduction of labour.

Imperialist wars entrench slavery or the deprivation of the power to negotiate the sale of one’s own resources and labour power. Many people in the South are deprived of the power to negotiate the prices of their products at values that reproduce their populations in better shape. They continuously earn less than what is needed to improve their standard of living. Put differently, the de-subjectification of the conquered populations, the retreat of their revolutionary consciousness and representation in the state, widens the divide between the incomes of the primary producers and the prices of their produce. Apart from the fact that colonialism had curtailed the industrial development of the colonies, these rising rates of southern exploitation generate higher northern wealth and undergird their historically rising trend of physical productivity. As of late, slavery has assumed quicker and more collective forms incarnate in the destruction of states. The imperialist wars of encroachment have also bred counter-revolutionary ideological impetuses at a time when working class organisation and its attendant ideology are waning. The war momentum carried by the objective

and impersonal forces of history, faces little opposition from effective peace movements and the dangers that capital will metabolise through all-out war are looming.

Furthermore, the production of the northern commodity is an anachronous predicate of its 'pedestal'—enslavement *cum* commercial exploitation. The stages of production are co-determined in social time as opposed to being sequential in conventional time. Production is the realisation of a torrent of accumulation by competition in which concomitant forms of slavery, from wage slavery to the outright slavery of consuming human lives in war, exhibit no beginnings or ends; production is just a flow of already implemented and to be implemented, diverse decisions to produce. The stages of production of laptops, mining for rare metals, the Congo wars and/or the Iraq campaign are presented teleologically or in some palatable order referring to any given commodity cycle only for the purpose of elucidation, whereas reality is *overdetermined*, cross-causal and/or where cause becomes effect, and effect, cause. In short, the so-called final realisation stage of the commodity at the point of sale in the centre, the point at which physical productivity is measured in dollars to show that the North is more productive, is not final because it entails or presupposes a cycle of imperialist destruction. Closing the loop of dollar-accounting exercises measuring surpluses in the Western market is fallacious or serves imperialist ideological proclivity, because the war extension, for raw materials or the regulation of demographic growth, is itself a big industry and the final realisation stage. Figuratively speaking, it is in the Congo or Iraq wars where the reproduction cycle ends and restarts.

Similarly, overdetermination overshadows the analytical dichotomy between productive and unproductive labour, which becomes just that: an analytical dichotomy that is indistinguishable in transformed actuality. Productive and unproductive labour are mutating categories from the same genus, the working class. To construct an argument for the making of surplus value under more mature conditions on the basis of this formal duality, inevitably leads to contradiction; as is the case with any formal process, here, we end up with a minute number of productive labourers. However, labour is the common denominator between productive and unproductive, and under capital's law of accumulation it is labour, including the necessarily disengaged labour (through unemployment or imperialist war of depopulation), which reproduces society to capital's desire.

Set against the fullness of reality, the connotation of productive labour can be anything but productive. The making of a bomb requires productive labour and produces surplus value, but the factory here is not some virtual space, it is the real populated and bombarded cities, and so on. The distinction productive/unproductive initially proved that surplus value is the product of living labour and, subordinately, that labour power is the commodity that is being sold for a wage and not some average intensity of labour as per Ricardo. For Marx, labour is subject-object. Developing reality sublates, it preserves and negates the contribution of productive and unproductive labour, and mediates them in a single form, as the product of a working class whose share of the social product is the wage bill as determined by the power balances of the class struggle. Just as the contradiction of transformation of value into price cannot be resolved logically, and is resolved by observing the historical process by which labour is conditioned to relinquish its share of value, the divide between productive and unproductive labour is resolved by grasping the organic unity of labour as a result of the developments in revolutionary consciousness.

Productivity pre-supposes the level of wealth, while individual productivity is pre-determined socially. The wage is a social wage whose rate varies in relation to how capital through the state or imperialist wars disciplines, regiments and controls the reproduction of labour. Unmediated categories that purport to show the industrial proletariat (productive labour) as an '*isolate*' (isolate as per Niebyl [no date]), or as the sole agent of history, are meaningless because the outward appearances that labour assumes are related to the functioning of the law of value (the essence), or the process by which capital subdues the international labour process. Wars of encroachment and subordinately, depopulation, are a crucial part of that and of the making of surplus value.

Once more, relying on Niebyl's work and moving away from the pragmatism of thinking in isolates, allows us to recognise the potential forms of the proletariat (as mediated immediacy) emerging in

broad class alliances, which include the unemployed, the poverty-wage workers and the peasantry as agents of history alongside the now dwindling numbers of the industrial working class (productive labour). Production under the hammer of war as the practice of the law of value and its more violent regimentation of the peripheral labour process via imperialist depopulation is the recurrent/ permanent historical event that requires explication. In that state of becoming, production is also systemic violence. The system here is a synchronically-reinforcing process of production to which violence is a prerequisite and an input. Consequently, the retreat in civilian-end use commodity sales and/or realisation (aka the under-consumption crisis) is matched by rising militarism (Lenin 1916). As Lebowitz (2006) aptly points out, production is not only about producing goods, but also about producing, conforming or revolutionary human beings. However, production is also production of waste (including militarism) and the production of labourers by the death of other labourers. I have also noted that production, whether it involves civilian or military cycles, is a co-temporal predicate of its own components.

The Third World is cheap in price terms because it was and continues to be cheapened to the requirement of a co-temporal production process by which the higher-priced output of bourgeois-owned Northern machinery requires inputs whose national owners are subjected to some form of *Shock and Awe* (code name for Iraq bombing in 1991). Yet here once again, we have a boomerang effect: the destitution of Third World workers drags down with it, the Northern working classes. In an organic value composition of capital, the term 'organic' is crucial because the value outlays on variable capital are a single share from a social product that integrates labour across national boundaries, and so the ultimate form of surplus-value creation occurs at the intersection where the labourer and his or her labour power is consumed in production, or where recurrent imperialist depopulation policy takes place. Apart from realising the excess surplus of the centre, war and 'reconstruction to extend war,' especially in the Arab world, perform a dual role: securitizing the rule of capital and under-valourising labour power.

Reconstruction for war's sake

There is no shortage of examples of reconstruction fuelling the potential of/or the continuation of war. The Lebanese case provides a vivid illustration of reconstruction cementing the grounds for future wars. The human cost of the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) is estimated at around 150,000 deaths, and the forgone income losses, not counting the damage to the capital stocks, are around 12 times the value of Lebanese GDP in 1974 (Eken et al 1995). But the war did not really end at its formal 1990 conclusion. Israel occupied the South until 2000 and wars continued to rage in the South after 2000. The Prime Minister for much of the 1990s, a Saudi billionaire leading the post-war reconstruction, was assassinated in 2005 – throwing the country further into turmoil. Israel invaded for a short period in 2006, causing damage to the infrastructure to the tune of anywhere from \$10 billion to \$15 billion US (Harvie and Saleh 2008), a short-lived war broke out in the summer of 2007, and a new conflict in neighboring Syria beginning in 2011 has drawn Lebanese militia to the war campaign there, inviting suicide bombers and fighting into the Northeast of the country. At the time of writing this paper in early 2017, fighting broke out in the shanty towns around Beirut between a hashish-growing tribe and a Palestinian refugee camp. The conflict included the use of light artillery fire and lasted for few days. Skirmishes of this sort remain very common. In spite of billions of dollars in official development assistance (ODA) and a debt equivalent to 163.1 percent of GDP (WDI 2014), the country exhibits dysfunctional institutions and still endures long periods of electricity blackouts and water shortages.

A much worse picture holds for Iraq. Iraq remains at war, and despite massive investments in reconstruction, the physical and, more importantly, the social infrastructure is debilitated. Whereas under the non-sectarian government of Saddam Hussein, electricity was restored within six months after the 1991 US-led assault, the electric-power crisis has continued unabated since 2003 (Shafaq News 2013). Even the Kurdish region, which had served as a foothold for Israeli and US soldiers, failed to capture any long-term industrial investment arising from an American security cover. As

soon as oil prices began to fall (late 2014), development in the Iraqi Kurdish region took a nosedive, with unemployment estimated at 50 percent (Vltchek 2016).

The plan for Iraq's reconstruction mimics that of Lebanon. The central state is restructured into various sectarian institutions that command and distribute rents, which build allegiance to the sect and not the state (The Ta'if Accord for Lebanon [1989] precedes the Bremer constitution for Iraq [2004]). Sectarianism is rooted in the colonial history of the region. Prior to the Ta'if Accord, the French-enacted Lebanese constitution of 1926 concentrated power in the hands of the Lebanese Maronite population. The Maronites had so many privileges under French colonialism that their leadership initially objected to French withdrawal from Lebanese territory in 1946, until they had guarantees from the remaining Lebanese factions that they would continue to enjoy these privileges after French evacuation (El-Solh 2004).

Imperialist efforts to splinter the Lebanese working class have not come to rest. Prior to the civil war of 1975-1990, in 1974, an Iranian sponsored cleric founded the Amal movement to sway the mainly Shiite population of South Lebanon away from the secularism and popular unity around the Palestinian national liberation movement. In my discussions with the prominent trade unionist Shawqi Shoubassi about the reasons for the Lebanese civil war, he claimed that prior to the civil war, unionism and inter-sectoral worker solidarity was growing and eroding the divisions of the French-designed 1926 constitution. This cross-sectoral worker solidarity vexed the Lebanese capitalist class; working-class solidarity was trampling the sectarianism of the French constitution. Prior to the civil war, Lebanon experienced economic and financial stability, with industrial production rising and the manufacturing sector workers composing 10 percent of the labour force while enjoying relative independence from the *defacto* system of rent/wage disbursement on the basis of sect. Shoubassi ascertained that he and others could foresee, with the rising violence of the right-wing Falange party and the state, that an imperialist and/or rightist pro-imperialist attack upon the secular Lebanese and Palestinian nationalist movements was forthcoming.

Later measures of Lebanese reconstruction under the auspices of the Saudi-sponsored Sunni government began with the goal of voiding the nationalist movement of its non-sectarian Sunni youth population (beginning in 1990). The Sunni Prime Minister provided tens of thousands of educational grants sending Sunni youth abroad, while simultaneously his financial rentier class milked the economy to the point where it began to shed a higher rate of jobs (typically debt-imposed austerity and low growth). In Lebanon, the distribution of state rents to cement sectarian bonds is so significant that in my discussions with the Deputy Director of the Central Bank of Lebanon in 2007 about the reasons for the growth in public debt, he told me as an example that the Shiite head of Parliament had created more than 30,000 government positions for which there was no function but to promote allegiance to the sect's leadership.

By contrast, East Asian reconstruction nationalises industrial knowledge (also making knowledge accessible in the national language) for the purpose of fortifying the development/national security nexus. Unlike Arab reconstruction, it does not promote a labour exodus; that is, it does not deprive the national economy of the skilled labour resource, as happened in the Arab world.⁵ Reconstruction for both Lebanon and Iraq was centred on investment in the infrastructure of a particular geopolitical-rent class. Through speculation funded by their respective central banks, reconstruction only boosted the asset prices of that class. Institutionally and ideologically, it forced upon individuals, a new set of reconstructed identities supported by a pay scheme aimed at the division of the working class. Victorious capital reconstructs and imposes its own identities upon the working class (Hobsbawm 1996). Apart from the question of degree, there is nothing theoretically peculiar here, for

⁵ Sweitzer M., October 2013, The Destruction of Iraq's intellectuals In the whirlwind of Iraq's violent history, the once-powerful academic class has disintegrated,
<http://www.aljazeera.com/humanrights/2013/10/destruction-iraqs-intellectuals-2013101114937748151.html>
(viewed 15 August 2015).

this working-class differentiation is the manifestation of capital and/or capital at work. What is peculiar is that the ruling class in these self-devouring social formations is not some persons in this and that sect or some other more sophisticated analytical category of sect linking sect to the ownership of the means of production; it is the inter-conflicting sectarian relationship whose very reproduction depends on the rate at which it destroys its own social formation. Because its external ties to imperialism are dominant, it imposes a mode of auto-inflicted commercial exploitation.

Until the US needed Germany in opposing the advance of communism circa 1948, it had a post-war Morgenthau plan whose purpose was to debilitate the German economy so that it would never rise again (similar to the huge debts imposed by the Versailles Treaty: Rienert [2005]). Once imperialist security and the primacy of politics came into play, the famed Marshall plan reinvigorated the German development/security nexus. Similarly for Japan –as early as 1947, its reparations to the Allied Powers for the damage and suffering it had caused during the war were toned down considerably because ‘its resources were not sufficient if it had to maintain a viable economy’ (Gräfrath 1995). Gräfrath then contrasts this docile tone with the devastating impact of reparations imposed upon Iraq for its invasion of Kuwait by a then US-dominated UN Security Council, likening their effects to the Versailles treaty. Had Iraq not been invaded in 2003, the hundreds of billions of dollars sought in reparation represented an un-serviceable debt burden that could only have led to the asphyxiation of development and possibly to future wars. In a thorough investigation of the post-1991 UN-imposed reparation scheme under UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 687 (1991) by Alain Gresh (2000), the procedures of UNSC reparations are exposed as a flagrant crime. While hundreds of thousands of children were perishing under the UN-imposed embargo (Gordon 2010), the UNSC demanded that at least 20 percent of Iraq’s oil revenues earned under the Food for Oil programme should compensate states and individuals that incurred economic damages from Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. Gresh documents how the US controlled, doctored evidence and manipulated the UN operation. It appointed a State Department staffer as the *de facto* head. This person, incidentally, controlled a legal team short-leashed by short-term contracts, some of whom sycophantically displayed macabre artefacts (like the shot-out helmets of young Iraqi soldiers) as proof of their loyalty to the US. The UNSC wanted to indenture Iraq with long-term debts for the costs of suspension in world trade during the 1991 Gulf-war– hypothetical charges, supposedly for the opportunity costs of losses had the war not occurred. It also overestimated the lost capital stocks and revenues of afflicted countries and went as far as considering hundreds of billions of dollars in compensation for environmental damages to surrounding states.

Even at the height of the war in Syria, the United Nations was fast at work gathering information about the rate of physical and social destruction as if in cahoots with intelligence agencies seeking better information about the impact of its explosive ordinance on the ground or simply a spot in the strategic Syrian landscape.⁶Underneath the surface, the reconstruction hype attracts a Syrian petty-property class – a class whose real estate assets were inflated by higher liquidity and a speculative bubble during the oil boom and who wish a quick end to the conflict in order to retain this speculative wealth, even if it this disposed of Assad and the nationalist front against foreign-funded terrorists. This premature institutionalisation of reconstruction is also part of the imperialist assault on Syria, a tragedy that will only end when the intractable inter-imperialist entente includes the Arab region.

As reported by *Al-Akhbar* (Arabic news source), the dodgy Lebanese model was being proposed for Syrian reconstruction.⁷The Lebanese model of sharing power and rent through the state between various sects created the permanent condition by which the country oscillates between high and low intensity warfare. With the ebbing of socialist ideology and with working-class dividedness being the

⁶Syria at War: Five Years On, <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/syria-war-five-years> (viewed 2 July, 2016).

⁷The Lebanese model for Syrian reconstruction: The ESCWA bid to hold Syria hostage to debt, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/21483> (viewed 17 August 2016).

capital relation in its state of becoming, the Sunni/Shiite and other sectarian schisms within the working class find their murky divisions territorially; capital is basking in the shadow of an arrangement in which there are as many countries within the country as there are sects. With imperialistically constructed constitutional statutes providing sectarianism with legitimacy (as in the constitutions of Lebanon and Iraq), one may deduce that the role of labour as social agency may be suppressed for years to come. However, as capital reconstitutes itself by the regime it imposes upon the labour process—that is, the destruction of labour’s solidarity—labour’s crisis is transmuted into a crisis of capital and capital’s rule. So far capital has been able to convince the masses that it is the only alternative. It was not so successful with the polar ice caps; they were not receptive to its ideology and continued to melt. Analogies aside, labour will inevitably reach out to de-commodify itself by re-appropriating the social product.

To add insult to injury, the reconstruction and/or neoliberal economic model being proposed for Syria while conflict rages, recommends further liberalisation under constitutional reforms that replace the representation of the citizen in the state by that of the sect or ethnicity:

The Syrian National Council (SNC) has coordinated with Western countries to inject emergency aid – a sort of a mini ‘Marshall Plan’ and it unsurprisingly advocates further market liberalisation in Syria. It is critical of the old economic liberalisation measures from the wrong angle, stating that they were not enough and that they were only modest economic reforms. It therefore advocates lifting of subsidies on necessity goods, fuel and electricity, the liberalisation of prices, the liberalisation of trade and capital accounts, the lifting of protection of local industry and the privatisation of nationalised assets... Amazingly, this neoliberal fantasy is being trotted out yet again, against all the mountains of empirical evidence to the contrary piled up over at least three decades, with all the vigorously bogus sincerity of religious hucksterism (Matar 2016).

To further camouflage the reconstruction ploy, the United Nations is forecasting a huge figure in the hundreds of billions of dollars, that would be destined for rebuilding Syrian losses. In a region where international antagonisms are unbridgeable, at least in the foreseeable future, which has seen more wars than any other in recent history, and in which war becomes an end in itself as imperialism regiment the labour process by immiserisation or depopulation measures, the United Nations vacuously suggests that ‘wars cannot last forever,’ and argues such funds would represent a ‘global public good’ for the international community.⁸ To use the overgeneralisations of neoclassical economics, these ‘public goods,’ as materialised in Lebanon and Iraq, served as free rides for the financialized class rather than as benefits to the local labouring classes. But as is typical of one-sided neoclassical reasoning, the centrality of the commodity to capitalism as expanding value, as well as other huge chunks of reality is omitted here; the cross-national US-led financialized class is already free-riding on revenues and, more significantly, on the power to expand credit from militarism. As already mentioned, militarism is the social accumulation domain that further commodifies humanity and holds steady the growth of global capital. It does this as other domains of capital do: first by immiserizing socially and, secondly by determining the economic terms of trade by capitalising on higher rates of consumption from public resources, albeit to a higher degree. Among the most significant consequences of militarism are the “War on Terror” and the ratcheting up of US military power, which lower the price of labour-power and many other commodities across the globe and force financial capital to flow to the US-dollar or ‘risk free’ markets in the imperialist centre. Although there are no clear figures for war costs and/or credit to war lenders (costs to the working class are credit to the financial class), a recent figure flaunted at Davos put American war debt over the last thirty years at \$14.2 trillion dollars.⁹ These figures, and any other figure related to this issue, are gross

⁸UN official: Rebuilding Arab war-torn countries a ‘global public good’:<http://www.thearabweekly.com/Opinion/6198/UN-official:-Rebuilding-Arab-war-torn-countries-a-%E2%80%98global-public-good%E2%80%99>(viewed 7 February, 2016).

⁹<http://www.zerohedge.com/news/2017-01-18/alibabaa-jack-ma-drops-redpill-us-wasted-14-trillion-wars-over-past-30-years>(viewed 7 February, 2017).

approximations, products of distortive pragmatism and subsidiary to the power balances of the class agents of history (labour and capital - *en gros*), including ideological power emanating from the war event itself.

Closing comment: the depopulation of Iraq and Syria

Although the dollar amounts associated with militarism are more significant than any revenues resulting from a Middle East reconstruction scheme, it is still not their quantitative magnitude alone that is most important to capital. While sitting at the global power pinnacle allows US-led capital the greatest share of the huge financial rent grabs (around a quarter of only US corporate profits are financial profits in the year 2015),¹⁰ that is, the hegemony and power of US-led imperialism, the strength of capital's rule and/or its primacy of politics, precede money-making. In a metabolic capital process, the dispensation of the Northern surplus in war or the tremendous technological and financial offshoots of militarism are subsidiary to the fact that imperialist wars both destroy value and produce and restructure value relations. Imperialist wars are the principal application of the law of value to peripheral formations.

For a long time, Western democracy has been a conveyor belt for paying off the working classes in aristocratic countries for their allegiance to imperialism, and it is no coincidence that many brands of Marxism predominant in the North are almost completely alien conditions in the Southern hemisphere. When social being and material circumstances determine consciousness, the issue of discrepancy between Marxist ideologies, North and South, lends itself to better understanding. While the war visited upon Iraq since 1990 did not bring democracy to Iraq, it relatively bolstered the imperial rents by which empire could partially bribe qua 'democratise' by the delivery of welfare to its own working classes. However, the rents this time around went to capital and US wages stagnated since, which proves the organic unity, including ideological unity, of the global working class.

War as production, and its associated investment demand to produce further wars, is the gyroscope steadying the global economy. In more formal terms, imperialist wars and their reverberations are the exogenous stabilising shocks to an otherwise fading system. However, in social terms, which is what matters, wars are the means by which US-led capital and its more aggressive facet, imperialism, add surplus value to its already huge stock of historical surplus value. Imperialist wars also expand commodification and cheapen principal commodities, as in reducing human beings to their labour power.

Moreover, the strategic control element and the ideological by-products of war that reconstitute the power of capital underwrite further expansion of fiat money – no amount of benefits from trade or reconstruction in the Middle East can surpass the imperialist war gains, especially as the gold standard has been superseded. A currency requires a commodity anchor, particularly oil, as Patnaik (2009) points out; however, that commodity is not only the object itself (the oil liquid); it is also the power emanating from the strategic control of that object (Kadri 2016). Whereas Patnaik posited that the US dollar's strength would tumble as dollars held abroad by foreigners get translated into real assets within the US, it turns out that any area of the world where the US establishes hegemony and where a foreign country such as China buys property also weakens US imperial and financial seigniorage. The US ruling class is vexed with China because China's real wealth – not (merely) financial wealth - at home and abroad is growing.

Such an understanding of oil as the object itself as well as the imperialist relationship controlling that object is what underwrites capitalist money and credit expansion; oil as subject and object allows the introduction of internally collapsing states such as Syria and Iraq to be made into tributaries of imperialist surplus value and power-building. The depopulation of these states, the production and

¹⁰Tables 6.16A, 6.16B and 6.16C: Corporate Profits by Industry," National Income and Product Accounts (NIPA), U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA).

consumption of their populations, yields surplus value by the degree of the simultaneous consumption of labour and labour power in war. Concurrently, wars provide regimentation of the labour process as a result of the hollowing out and erasure of revolutionary theory by the onslaught of identity politics. Moreover, conceptualising oil imperialism in terms of oil as well as the relationship of oil's strategic control through war-making as production would admit a scenario in which Saudi Arabia could be pushed into collapse like Iraq, and/or Iran could be aggressed in order to pressure or weaken China and ratchet up imperialist dollar hegemony. In either case, the destabilisation of China's market expansion strategy by means of inducing war in Saudi Arabia or Iran plays into the strategic goal of US-led imperialism.

In 2014, the AW accounted for 68 percent of the world's battle-related deaths, 47 percent of its internally displaced, and 58 percent of its refugees.¹¹ That said, the fact that there are millions of war dead in the Middle East, especially in Syria and Iraq, is no departure from previous colonial depopulation or imperialist practice (Algeria is the outstanding Arab example and the starvation of Yemen is looming as another example). Theoretically, the imperialist-side of the law of value consumes people's labour power along with their lives to produce surplus value, and any obfuscation of such relationship is beautification of capital. The whole of which Marx speaks, as in 'the truth is in the whole,' is the class struggle assuming the forms of war as production, depopulation by war (a form of the class struggle) serves the regeneration of surplus value through replacing living by dead labour and/or regulating the production/extermination of labour power globally. In the latter case, dead labour is no longer the value in the machine, it is literally the dead labourer. For colonial and imperialist histories, depopulation was both an end to further capital's control and an end in itself.

Moreover, imperialist wars strip peoples of sovereignty over their resources and act as means of enslavement that result in the highest form of surplus value. With the US riding on such strong and persistent historical currents, the notion that imperialism will somehow drop war and its growth by militarism for the pittance of reconstruction is either obtuse or malevolent; in either case, it de-totalises or exonerates capital as if war is somehow something of a momentary transgression, an unintended consequence, from which it quickly recovers. Capital needs war in order to accumulate. However, with the degeneration of revolutionary consciousness along with a war momentum, capital may soon become a function of militarism. War has become capital's reason for being. The professionals engaged in discussing the possibility of soon-to-be reconstruction in Syria or Iraq without pointing out the international antagonisms behind the war and the permanency of war to capital are in the business of obscuring the true motives of imperialism. I will end with a note that I should have started this essay with: so far, in money terms, every penny in tax costs that the working classes of central economies defray for wars, the US-led financial class earns as credit, not to mention the immense capital flows to central markets impelled by the growing rate of global insecurity.

¹¹ See UNDP, Arab Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the prospects for human development in changing reality, UNDP, New York
2016.http://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/library/huma_development/arab-human-development-report-2016--youth-and-the-prospects-for/ (viewed 30 November, 2016).

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