The Real Roots of US Empire EXPOSED | Prof. Samir Saul

Historian Samir Saul joins Pascal to examine imperialism as a system of wealth transfers enforced through coercion. Discussing his new book, Saul revisits Lenin, distinguishes imperialism from colonialism, and explains the dollar's role in American power. Their conversation explores the Marshall Plan, Soviet decline, financial dependence, and resistance from Russia and China. Saul argues that challenges to Western hegemony create dangerous pressures for escalation, while identifying public opposition to war and greater national independence as possible sources of hope. Samir's Links: Imperialism: As Rampant Today as in the Past (Baraka Books): https://www.barakabooks.com/catalogue/imperialism-a-burning-issue-today-as-in-the-past/ Articles with Michel Seymour (Pressenza): https://www.pressenza.com/fr/author/samir-saul-michel-seymour/ Neutrality Studies Links: Neutrality Studies Substack: https://pascallottaz.substack.com Support Neutrality Studies: https://neutralitystudies.com/donate Neutrality Studies shop: https://neutralitystudies.com/shop Time Stamps 00:00 Samir Saul: rediscovering imperialism 05:27 Lenin, colonialism and a new definition 14:42 The dollar and control of developed economies 18:07 The Marshall Plan and the Soviet debt trap 29:36 The unipolar moment and its limits 35:04 Russia, China and resistance to domination 42:20 Europe, Japan and the imperial hierarchy 49:56 An imperial system in crisis: war or retreat

#Pascal

Welcome back, everybody, to Neutrality Studies. Today, for the first time, we're joined by Professor Samir Saul, a full professor of international history at the University of Montreal. Samir, welcome. Pleased to be with you. I'm very glad to have you here because you wrote a wonderful book. Let me just show it for a second. It's called Imperialism: As Rampant Today as in the Past. And just so people know, the lower part of the cover actually shows the flag of the United States being held up somewhere in the world. Samir, where do we even start when we discuss imperialism? Because in your book, you actually start in basically prehistory, in very early times. What's the core of the concept to you?

#Samir Saul

I think we should start with the present. In fact, that's how the book started. It started by observing what was going on around me and looking for explanations, looking for analytical tools to understand what was going on. It looked very much like imperialism, but none of the existing explanations or theories seemed to fit. The powers that are active on the international scene are not acting in the way powers acted in the past. And yet there is definitely exploitation and domination.

Now, I turned to imperialism because this seemed to be a good starting point. I was thinking in terms of the saying: if something looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and sounds like a duck, it's a duck.

So I thought, this is imperialism. But none of the explanations seemed to meet the need. And surprisingly, the term "imperialism" had sort of disappeared from public discourse. It was a common term used in the '60s and '70s, and then suddenly, in the 1980s, it disappeared, including on the left, which is very surprising because the left, and especially the Marxists, used it very often. But it sort of went out of use during the '80s, and it was overwhelmed by the concept of globalization. Globalization is a very sanitized expression of international control and the economic expansion of capitalism around the world.

And imperialism sort of disappeared. So I thought, well, something had to be done about that, and I had to look into that concept. I've been thinking about this for many, many years. This is not new. This is something that goes back to the time when I was an undergraduate student and has continued since then. And since theories didn't seem to meet the requirements of the moment, I thought—as is normal for a historian—that going back to history would be the way to reconstitute the concept and restart the analysis, in order to arrive at an explanation or definition suitable especially for our times, but also applicable to the past.

Now, that's quite an undertaking because societies change and economic conditions change. So I had a lot of research to do and thinking—especially thinking—to revisit the concept and try to refresh it. So the book is an attempt to update explanations or definitions of imperialism in order to have a definition that is applicable today. That's very important because today, imperialism has sort of disappeared into the clouds. People don't know what it is, including the left—to my great surprise, including the left. So I had to start from scratch, basically.

#Pascal

That's it. And I do agree, although I must qualify that: the mainstream left. The actual Marxists, like the people who still call themselves Marxists, they actually still use the concept, but they're a tiny minority by now, right? And there's one more group that recently emerged that's using it again: the people who are criticizing Russia for being imperialist, as in a land-grabbing power, which is what they mean by the concept. The Marxists, on the other hand, use it to describe the tendency of a liberal capitalist system that strives for dominance and exploitation and then, out of the logic of how it works, must go and dominate other places. Are you using the concept yourself in one of these two ways? If yes, which one? And if not, then how are you using it?

#Samir Saul

No, I'm not using it in either of these ways, because the problem with the minority of Marxists who still remember the term imperialism is that they rely entirely on Lenin's definition, which is an

excellent definition. It's an excellent book. In fact, I write in my book that Lenin's pamphlet is the best book ever written on imperialism. The problem is that it is dated. It has to be updated. It has to be refreshed. Lenin's definition is based on the idea that imperialism is monopoly capitalism. Monopoly capitalism is, for Lenin, finance capital—Rudolf Hilferding's finance capital—which means, for Hilferding and Lenin, the fusion of bank capital and industrial capital into one form of capital, a single capital.

That's what was taking place in Germany before 1914. In Wilhelmine Germany, that was, in fact, the evolution of capitalism. It was becoming concentrated, with an interpenetration of bank and industrial capital. That, to Lenin, looked to be the future of capitalism. It didn't turn out to be that way. In fact, this was an exception. In other big capitalist powers like Britain and the U.S., this fusion did not take place. We had huge enterprises, large banks, and large industries dominating their sectors. But there was no fusion. There was no finance capital in Hilferding's sense. We have finance capital today in a different sense, but we'll talk about that later. So there's a problem with Lenin's definition.

And there's also another problem with that definition: it dates the beginning of imperialism to around 1900, with the birth of finance capital. Now, historically, this is not accurate, because expansionism and imperialism started long before the arrival of this finance capital, assuming that this was the future of capitalism. Expansionism, colonialism, even the export of capital had started before the arrival of finance capital, before the arrival of monopoly capitalism. One of Lenin's major achievements was to pinpoint the importance of the export of capital. So there's a historical distortion. There's something wrong.

#Pascal

So the phenomenon predates the economic underpinnings that Lenin put his finger on.

#Samir Saul

Correct. Having said that, Lenin's study of imperialism has some very important achievements. He is the first to distinguish colonialism from imperialism. In other words, possessing empires and colonies is one thing. Imperialism, as Lenin understood it, is a much wider system of control. Even independent countries, even sovereign states, can be under foreign control through imperialism, whereas colonialism is direct, immediate control by a colonial power. Now, he was the first to distinguish the two phenomena. And this discovery is extremely important because we live in an era where colonialism has largely disappeared, but imperialism has not. It has continued. So this is Lenin's major achievement in his study of imperialism, although the basic definition is dated and has to be refreshed. And this is what I try to do in my book. I'm trying to bring it up to date.

#Pascal

Hey guys, autumn spirit is here, and we've launched some new merch. For instance, the monster from our Kill Symposium has arrived on T-shirts, tumblers, and magnets. The little fella is really cute. Check it out. Any purchase directly helps us keep the lights on. So thanks a lot, and see you soon. So what is it? What is the up-to-date definition of imperialism?

#Samir Saul

Having turned all this over in my mind, having gone through centuries of historical development of capitalism and even pre-capitalist states, I arrived at the following definition. Imperialism is a system of international economic transfers by extra-economic means. Every word is important. It's a system. It's not just an operation, a raid, you know, to plunder.

#Pascal

It's not just the government, not just the king who orders his army. It's more than that.

#Samir Saul

Correct. It's a system, you know, involving very strong political influence, economic control, and especially transfers. The main object of imperialism is to transfer value from outside to the imperialist center. So it's a system of value transfers, but by extra-economic means, mainly by force. Not just trade. Trade is not imperialism. Imperialism means using extra-economic means—in other words, basically force, but also other means, for example, the extraterritorial application of one's law.

#Pascal

Yeah, types of coercion, different types of coercion.

#Samir Saul

Different types of coercion, in order to extract wealth from abroad and bring it to the center.

#Pascal

So in this sense, what we saw earlier this year with Venezuela is just a textbook case, right?

#Samir Saul

Perfect. It's a perfect illustration of this definition. Trump went into Venezuela to seize the oil. He now says Venezuela can sell its oil, but the money has to go into an American bank account. Right. And the U.S. decides how much goes back to Venezuela. In other words, he used force to seize wealth and appropriate it for the U.S. It's a perfect illustration of imperialism.

#Pascal

So the idea is expropriation: you take the wealth of other nations or other places and transfer a large part of it to yourself. To what extent do you then distinguish this version of imperialism from concepts like neocolonialism? I mean, we would find some of these imperialist structures, for instance, in the way France is extracting rent from the 14 or 15 African states for which it still prints money—the African francs.

#Samir Saul

Le franc CFA.

#Pascal

Le franc CFA, yeah. Because, to me, I would categorize that as a type of neocolonialism. Would you say, no, this is actually also a type of imperialism?

#Samir Saul

There are similarities. Neocolonialism looks very much like—you know, it is imperialism. I would say it's imperialism applied to less developed countries that acquired their independence through decolonization but, in fact, lost much of it through the maintenance of ties with, or control by, the former colonial powers. Now, imperialism is wider because it applies not only to less developed, previously colonized states, but even to developed states. Imperialism is universal. U.S. control today does not limit itself to the less developed, resource-producing South. It controls developed countries. Its aim is to control the entire world. So neocolonialism is part of imperialism, applicable, I would say, to less developed countries—countries that underwent colonialism and are now under neocolonial control.

#Pascal

Can you share a couple of examples of how the current imperial core is actually extracting rent even from developed countries?

#Samir Saul

Well, it started with U.S. multinationals during the 60s and 70s that invested and opened plants in Europe, especially Western Europe, in order to control the market. It's a monopoly strategy. Their aim is not so much to compete on prices as to drive out competition and take over the market. That was the starting point of U.S. control of Western economies. That was also the case in Canada. Canada was probably the Western country most controlled by the U.S. during the 50s and 60s, with massive investments in resources, oil, mining, and so on. But not only that: U.S. companies had

control even in high-technology sectors. That was the former method, or means, of control. It was a perfect example of the export of capital, which is what Lenin pinpointed as one of the elements of imperialism. But after the 70s, the main method has been the use of the dollar.

What happened in the 70s was the end of the period of expansion, the economic boom from the Second World War to the early 1970s—what the French call the 30 years of glorious growth. That ended in the early 70s, and it led to the detachment of the dollar from gold. The Bretton Woods system was based on a close link between the dollar and gold: $35 for one ounce of gold. That broke down. And in the early 70s, the dollar was detached from gold, which meant that the U.S. could print dollars freely. And that's what it's doing. It's printing dollars, and with these dollars, it's buying things from abroad for nothing, for paper. Now, that's a formidable method of exploitation and transfer of wealth. There was nothing like it in the past. All one has to do is issue dollars and obtain goods. This is imperialism in its most perfect form.

#Pascal

And this continued for decades. And, you know, if we look at other times, especially right after the Second World War, the Marshall aid that was given to Europe was not aid. It was basically loans that trapped countries. But it did actually create infrastructure because it was stuff from the United States shipped over to Europe to be used in these infrastructure projects and so on. I mean, there was a real transfer of infrastructure. But all of that then stopped, in my view. Financialization in the U.S. and in Europe really started in earnest in the 1970s, along with the deindustrialization of these economies. How does that fit into the imperialist framework?

#Samir Saul

The Marshall Plan was a response to specific conditions. It was special. European countries had great needs after the war because of the destruction and so on, but they had no means to buy from the US. The only country that could export anything after the Second World War was the US. It had surpluses. Europeans had needs but no means. So what the Marshall Plan did was give them the means, give them the dollars with which to buy US products. That was one reason. The second reason is that the US had surpluses from the war. And without customers buying those surpluses, there would have been an economic crisis in the US. So it was a way to avert an economic crisis. The third reason is that it was necessary to put European economies back in order to avoid the risk of these countries going left, going socialist, going communist. Let's not forget that at this time, the Soviet Union was a model.

#Pascal

The counter-concept. It was a counterproposal for how to structure a socioeconomic entity.

#Samir Saul

Exactly. And at that point in history, a successful one. It had succeeded in industrializing. It had succeeded in pushing back German aggression. The Soviet Union had a good reputation, good press. So the U.S. had to fight this counter-model. And for that reason, it made concessions to European countries in order to build them up, to make sure that they didn't collapse. So the Marshall Plan is, in itself, not specifically imperialist because of the circumstances. But overall, it's an attempt to consolidate Western capitalism and therefore U.S. imperialism. Because if its European allies were failing, the U.S. system would be in danger. After 1945, the U.S. had as its objective large-scale expansion around the world and competition with the Soviet Union. So it couldn't afford to have one of its components in trouble.

#Pascal

Right.

#Samir Saul

So the Marshall Plan is a complex, nuanced issue. It's not clear-cut imperialism, but it's within an imperialist objective.

#Pascal

And then, as the system went forward, the clash of systems, to me, stopped somewhere in the 1980s. There was a moment when the Soviet Union as a counter-concept started failing—certainly with perestroika and glasnost, since Gorbachev came to power in 1985. How important was that for this development of modern imperialism? It's extremely important.

#Samir Saul

It's vital because the problems in the Soviet Union did not start in the 80s. They started in the late 60s, when there was a slowdown in the economy. There was a loss of productivity and various attempts to correct the problem, none of them successful. These attempts continued until the 1980s, and they all failed. One of the problems in the Soviet Union was the management of a huge economy from the center. The centralized economy had become so complex that the center was unable to keep up and respond to various needs. So there was an economic slowdown in the Soviet Union from the end of the 60s, and it got worse. Now, one of the answers the Soviet Union sought to its problems was to introduce technology in order to increase production and productivity.

The technology the Soviet Union sought was in the West. It wanted to import this technology, and to do so, it began borrowing in the West. And its Comecon allies borrowed even more. Poland and Romania borrowed very large amounts to import this technology. Now, the aim was to produce in order to sell to the West. This is a relationship that looks very much like what pre-capitalist or less developed countries did. They borrowed in the 19th century from Paris and London in order to

export their raw materials, which means they were very dependent on Western markets. If Western markets were booming, imports would be high.

If they entered into a recession or crisis, they would import less. Now, Western Europe in the 1970s entered into a recession—in fact, a long-term recession. We're still in it. We haven't found the path toward recovery and growth. So they borrowed at the wrong time. They borrowed at a moment when the West was not ready to import. It was importing less. And as they borrowed, they had to pay interest to the banks. Now, this interest became heavier and heavier to bear in the 70s, and the West launched an offensive. The human rights offensive, the Helsinki Conference of 1975, was an offensive to shake up the system. It's different from what anti-communism did during the 50s and 60s.

In the 70s, it was an offensive to transform the system or bring it down. The Soviet Union was therefore under pressure because of its lower productivity, its economy not going well, an ideological offensive by the West, and the need to pay interest to Western countries. To take an example, in 1989, when Ceausescu was overthrown, he was pressuring his population to pay back interest to Western banks—pressuring them hard, impoverishing them, and therefore turning them against him, making them opponents. They're the ones who brought him down because he was paying the West. He was contractually obliged to pay interest and to find the money for that interest among his population.

#Pascal

So your interpretation of the fall of the communist system is that it got itself caught in a debt trap?

#Samir Saul

Partly. And it got caught in a debt trap because it had internal problems for which it didn't seem to have solutions. There seems to have been some problem in the superstructural system in the Soviet Union with understanding what was going on, understanding the evolution of technologies, production, and so on. There was a lack of imagination, too, that ended up in a sort of sclerosis of the system.

#Pascal

In your interpretation, it's not capitalism per se, but this exploitative system that managed to convince the communist bloc to take the very steps that led to capture, right? Because this is a form of capture, isn't it? It's a form of capture. Sorry, I didn't hear your question very well. Sorry, the question is: how did the imperialist system manage to sell this form of capture, which previous generations of communists had managed to avoid? I mean, as you said, until the 1960s, it was going relatively well for the communists.

#Samir Saul

Desperation. Lack of solutions.

#Pascal

Impasse.

#Samir Saul

They were at an impasse. There was a blockage, and they were unable to resolve it by their own means. There was a loss of imagination. I would say there had been a loss of creativity within the system that made them turn towards their adversaries. They must have known full well that they were taking risks. I mean, this is basic knowledge for communists: you don't borrow from capitalists. It's as simple as that. And they did. If they did, it's because they had to.

#Pascal

And then the imperialist system crowned itself king of the hill in 1991 after the Soviet Union finally collapsed, right? To the point where Fukuyama wrote The End of History and said, “Now the contest is decided. Liberal capitalism will reign supreme until the end of humanity,” right? History stopped. History stopped. I mean, he meant it in the sense of a contest between systems, right? The contest between systems has been decided. Right. And then liberal imperialism went haywire and, again, changed the entire global discourse from one about imperialism to one about globalization. That's right. What is your interpretation of the unipolar moment, actually?

#Samir Saul

Well, the unipolar moment was something that the U.S. would have liked in 1945, when it was absolutely dominant economically in terms of industrial production, gold, raw materials, and capital. It had everything except one thing: control of Eastern Europe. It could not control Eastern Europe. There was this problem called the Soviet Union, and it couldn't be resolved by force. The Soviet Union was just too strong to be pressured. So the attempt to establish world domination in 1945 had to be postponed.

It arrived in 1990, 1991. That's the moment when the U.S. thought that the world was at its disposal, that it could finally establish what I call planetary imperialism: imperialism over everything and everybody, not just southern countries, which is what European imperialists did in the 19th century, and the 20th also, but the whole world, including developed countries. And in fact, it seemed to be on its way to doing that. In the 1990s, the U.S. was dominant and seemed to be

penetrating everywhere, making everyone obey its orders and serve its needs, using the dollar as the instrument of penetration. And we were on the way to a universal imperialism, what I call a planetary imperialism. And to people like Fukuyama and others, it seemed to be the end of history.

#Pascal

And just as a side note, they very self-servingly started calling it the Pax Americana, right? The American peace. Beautiful, right?

#Samir Saul

But okay, let's continue. Of course. And they associated it with the Pax Britannica of the 19th century, this idea that Britain ruled the world in the best interests of the world.

#Pascal

The last empire, the last version of imperialism that crumbled. Yeah. You see how they hand over the baton, right? Like in a marathon.

#Samir Saul

The continuity, you know, continuity. You just continue. Now, this seemed to be going very well, fine and dandy, for some time, except that problems appeared. The system is not perfect. It does not function as it should because it subjects other countries to outside domination. And it so happens that other countries—some other countries, anyway—did not accept it and were able to recover as much independence as they could. Now, this is the case especially with China and with Russia—even Russia. That's the whole point of the conflict with Russia: Russia does not accept U.S. hegemony. It does not accept outside control over its internal affairs and its overall history. So there are dissidents within the system.

And the system itself does not function correctly. The crisis of 2008, the subprime crisis, is a major, major break in the U.S. attempt to dominate the world. It's an instance where globalization, presented as the best solution, as the ultimate paradise for everybody, would not work. So the system had flaws in it, and these flaws became larger and larger. And we now have a system that is on the verge of disintegrating. Unipolarity is strongly contested. And U.S. policy—that's the explanation for what the U.S. is doing around the world—is an attempt to reestablish that hegemony by force. By force. That's the reason the U.S. intervenes everywhere. It's because there are rebels in the system, and it has to put down these rebels.

#Pascal

And so this is a very useful kind of interpretation, in my view, because it does a couple of things. One is that it actually brings back this economic perspective on how things work and connects violence to economics, which, of course, Marxists have always done. But on the other hand, it would shift the attention a little bit from what the realists in international relations do, right? People like John Mearsheimer will reduce everything to security competition, right?

It's just the sheer size of these countries that then leads them to feel insecure, and hence they—blah, blah, blah—engage in security competition. You would say, no, it's not security competition that animates Russia and China; it is resistance to imperial domination. And this would resonate very, very strongly with other colleagues who, for instance, research what is happening at the moment on the Arabian Peninsula. And the resistance movements there are resistance to imperialism, resistance to colonialism. And you would say this is the same underlying motivation behind China's and Russia's actions. Is that about it?

#Samir Saul

Yes, Russia and China are trying to set up national systems of national economies. Now, national economies are completely in opposition to imperial control. So, by definition, they're moving in a direction that does not correspond to what the U.S. wants. Now, the security issue is not secondary for a country like Russia, for example. In order to defend its national economy or its existence as a nation-state, Russia has to protect its borders. U.S. action against Russia is not just economic. It's military. The expansion of NATO on Russia's frontier is a direct threat to Russian security. So there's no real contradiction between realism and, I would say, an overall more exhaustive analysis of international problems that takes economic issues into account.

#Pascal

No, I didn't mean to pit your interpretation of imperialism against realism. Not at all. I do think they are very, very compatible. I just wanted to point out that the realists will say that, if we go all the way down, it all boils down to security competition. But if we take your interpretation, then security competition is just one element of something even deeper, which is actually resistance to imperialism, resistance to being dominated. And that's the core of what the resistance is actually about.

#Samir Saul

Correct. Especially at a time when we have the type of imperialism we have today: one imperialist power aiming at world control, aiming at establishing a planetary, universal imperialism. In other words, any state that wants to protect itself will find itself in an anti-imperialist position. And this is where I distance myself from some analysts—there are not many, in any case, who work in that field—who think that Russia and China are imperialist competitors to the U.S. That's not correct. If

we anchor our analysis in history, the present period emerges from unipolarity, from total U.S. domination of the world in the 1990s. Russia and China were to be dominated like any other country in the American vision, in this universal imperialism that the U.S. had in mind. What Russia and China are doing is trying to extract themselves from foreign control, from U.S. control.

#Pascal

They are not competitors. They are not trying to establish an imperial system themselves. That's what you would say.

#Samir Saul

Correct. Correct. Now, that's observing the world as it is, not as we think it might be in the future. This is where some analysts or theoreticians, if I can call them that, go wrong. They say, or they think, China has the features of a country that could dominate the world. Therefore, it dominates the world. No, it might dominate the world in the future. And if it uses force to extract wealth from the rest of the world, it will be imperialist. At the moment, it's not. Russia is certainly not. Russia is certainly not, because it doesn't have the means to extract wealth from the rest of the world. So the world today does not look like 1914, when we had several competing imperialist powers that were relatively equal. Italy was not, you know, but Britain and Germany especially were at about the same level, and both were competing for world domination. We don't have that today. Today, there's one imperialist power that is losing its hegemony and is doing everything possible to reestablish it.

#Pascal

And in your interpretation, then, Russia and China trade with the world, but they do that basically on the basis of reciprocity, I would suppose, rather than trying to extract wealth from other states through force, through extra-economic means. And even what Russia is doing in Ukraine is, in a sense, maybe a land grab, but it is not the extraction of wealth from Ukraine by extra-economic means. Is that how you understand it?

#Samir Saul

Correct. Correct. What Russia is doing in Ukraine is protecting itself. It is threatened, clearly threatened, by NATO expansion and has been threatened for some time. Now its back is to the wall in Ukraine, and faced with this ultimate danger, it took action.

#Pascal

It's protecting itself.

#Samir Saul

It's not searching for wealth in Ukraine.

#Pascal

There's no wealth in Ukraine. No, there's no wealth in Ukraine. I mean, certainly not. It's being destroyed right now, and the Russians are actually also bleeding quite significantly. So, in this sense, really, the only imperialist power that we have left is the United States. Is there something like downstream imperialism, like the way that the Europeans are acting again towards the Global South? Or, in a sense, even my beloved Japan? After the Second World War, there was this very interesting period when Japan was forced to pay reparations.

But these reparation payments, which went mostly to Southeast Asia, immediately became an economic engine for something like a Marshall Plan. That money was then used to bring Japanese goods into Southeast Asia and actually became the kernel of modern-day Japan's foreign aid program under JICA, which is very, very important for Japan in fostering economic dependencies in Southeast Asia and Africa. But actually, that is kind of a win-win situation because the others do get something out of it. But is there a form of downstream imperialism as well in the global system of imperialism?

#Samir Saul

Yes. It's because, again, of history. Go back to history. Developed countries were themselves imperialist powers.

#Pascal

France, Germany, Britain especially, and Japan—they were imperialist powers.

#Samir Saul

Now, what happens after 1945 is that they come under the control of a much more powerful imperialism—a super-imperialism, if one could call it that. So they find themselves in an intermediary position, being dominated by the U.S. but being dominant in regions or areas they formerly controlled. Correct, there are sub-imperialisms within an overall imperialist system. The imperialist system is hierarchical. It's like a pyramid. On top, there's the leading imperialism, the U.S. Lower down, you have the former imperialist powers—Europe, Japan—and some developed countries like Canada, which was not an imperialist state but is part of the imperialist system. And at the very bottom, the rest of the world. It's a hierarchy. It's not equality. It's not an international community, as they often say. It's a hierarchy.

#Pascal

Yeah, and a lot of people need to be dirt poor in order for a few of them to be very, very rich. And in this sense, though, traditional Marxists would, of course, say that any capitalist system necessarily has imperialist tendencies. Is that the same for you? Or do you think that there are other drivers of imperialism besides just, you know, unfair capitalism?

#Samir Saul

In my analysis in the book, I relate imperialism to very primitive forms of plunder and, you know, raids for booty—plunder going back to earlier times. These habits are adopted and developed by capitalism and made more complex. It's not just a raiding party going to steal slaves or gold or spices, but a system put in place with very complex interrelations so that wealth can be extracted in an invisible way. That's what capitalism does. Capitalism does have these tendencies by its very nature because it is expansionist. It has to find profit. Without profit, capitalism collapses. So if profit is unavailable in one place, it has to find it elsewhere. So definitely, capitalism has within it the seeds of expansionism and imperialism by its very nature, you know, as a system. Yes.

#Pascal

But in this sense, especially if we take your definition, you could imagine something other than capitalism also having imperialist tendencies. Like, let's say a very, very violent dictator gets the idea, "I now want to force everybody else to pay rent to me." I mean, that could motivate that dictator to go out and implement imperialism without his state necessarily being capitalist.

#Samir Saul

Correct. This is the primitive type of imperialism. I call it extractive. I don't remember the term I used. Extraction by coercion.

#Pascal

Go back to Rome, for example.

#Samir Saul

Rome, in the past, would attack in order to seize wealth and bring back slaves.

#Pascal

It's kind of a simple form of imperialism, right? A very direct form. And in this sense, capitalist imperialism is a much more refined, much more indirect, much more camouflaged form of imperialism.

#Samir Saul

Correct, because the system is more complex. You know, trade and finance make it less visible, less evident, less obvious than theft in the past.

#Pascal

It looks much nicer, right? Pax Americana looks so much nicer than just, like, beating people's heads in to take their wealth back home.

#Samir Saul

It's more respectable. Now, that doesn't mean that heads are not chopped off. They are. But it's not presented as the acme or as the model. It's something that should be concealed because it's not consonant with ideals, principles, and values. So we keep it hidden. But violence is part and parcel of the system, of course.

#Pascal

Otherwise, the drive for domination.

#Samir Saul

Yes, the drive for domination and the urge to use force. Anytime you have a disparity of power between collectivities, societies, and states, there's a danger that the stronger party will use force. And it becomes imperialist when the objective of that use of force is the transfer of wealth.

#Pascal

You know, the interpretation by Jeffrey Sachs and a couple of others in the U.S. is, of course, that part of the malaise we're seeing today is the victory lap of the neoconservative movement in the United States in the 1990s. And he keeps saying these people just want one thing and one thing only: total dominance, dominating the entire globe. So you would then, in that sense, integrate the neoconservative movement into this overall imperialist drive of the United States, right? It's how it works, how it implements itself.

#Samir Saul

Correct. They're the ultimate form of U.S. domination because they don't just say, "We want to use covert means." They want to use brute force—brute force—in order to capture wealth from abroad. They are, I would say, the summit, the perfect form of imperialist control.

#Pascal

So where does your analysis lead you in the end? When we look at 2026, we see that this capitalist-driven form of imperialism is running into a brick wall in Ukraine, and that wall is called Russia. It's running into a brick wall in the East called China. It's running into a brick wall in Iran. So what does running into these walls do to an imperialist power or an imperialist system?

#Samir Saul

It puts it in a state of deep, deep, deep crisis. It is faced with huge decisions and big problems. Continuing along the path of force does not seem to succeed, at least at this level of force. Let's keep in mind that the U.S. has not launched a full-scale war against anyone yet. It has been fighting in an indirect way. Proxy wars are the formula used by the U.S. to continue warfare without getting itself directly involved. It has been using proxy wars, not just in Ukraine. It used a proxy war in Syria. Even Libya was a proxy war. Remember Barack Obama saying, "We lead from behind. We lead from behind."

Why is that? It's because the experiments in Iraq and Afghanistan were a complete fiasco, a total failure. And the U.S. makes mistakes, and it sometimes learns—sometimes learns that it shouldn't go that way. It should use other means to apply force, and that means using others. This is not a new method. This is what Britain did throughout the 19th century and the 20th century. The U.S. is a much larger model of what Britain has done in the past. Britain could not control the world by itself. It had to use others to do its work. So the proxy system is not an American invention.

They're just applying what Britain did. And it's a way of resolving the problem of not having the means to achieve the ends that are sought. The U.S. wants total control of the world but does not have the means. So it's using others. This method is failing. It's failing in the most obvious way in Ukraine. So the alternative now for the U.S. is either to back down or to go to war openly. This is why this period is extremely dangerous for the world, because the U.S. is faced with the dilemma of continuing on a path that is leading to, you know, the disintegration of the system, or going all out to wage war in order to reestablish itself. So it's very dangerous.

#Pascal

Yeah, that is very dangerous. I mean, you're arguing that the United States is now literally faced with an existential threat, not because the continental United States is threatened by weapons, but because the global imperial system that they built is about to collapse. Correct?

#Samir Saul

Correct.

#Pascal

In realism, we know what states do when their existence is threatened. They go all in because anything else makes no sense.

#Samir Saul

Yes, but in this case, existence is not threatened. It's U.S. ambitions that are threatened. The imperial system—the imperial system. Not the U.S. state, but the system.

#Pascal

The question then is, who controls the nukes? Is it the United States as a country, or is it the U.S. as an imperial system? Let's hope it's the state. It's an awful question.

#Samir Saul

I don't have an answer, but it's obvious that a system has to transform itself into a state, into political means of exercising power. And these means take the form of a state. So the U.S. state controls the nuclear weapons of the imperialist system. If one needs to establish a clear line, that would be it.

#Pascal

Samir, that almost makes me shiver because it's a scary thought, but I do think you have a very valid point with this analysis of how imperialism works.

#Samir Saul

It is dangerous, extremely dangerous, but there are slivers of hope. It's not just a completely dark, pessimistic picture. A sliver of hope, for example, comes from the U.S. itself, from within the U.S. The American population is not a warmongering population. They're not seeking war. And as the thick layers of propaganda dissipate, they start seeing things. They understand things better. We see this, for example, in the war against Iran. At the start of the war, we were told the U.S. was going to conquer everything. It was going to be easy. Iran was a backward state.

Public opinion usually goes along with what governments say when they launch a war. That's one of those historical facts that are extremely troubling, but it's a fact. But people can open their eyes as events unfold, as events show them that the official explanations don't apply. So there's hope in the U.S. There's also hope in the fact that other countries will not go along with aggressive U.S. policies.

They may back off because what the U.S. would be demanding of them is their total destruction. What is going on in Ukraine should be a lesson to all. Ukraine is being wiped off the map. Its population has been cut in half.

#Pascal

And it's the kind of future that might actually be on the cards for the entire European continent if this waking up doesn't happen. But you're absolutely right. The best chances of actually opposing this kind of imperialism lie in internal political processes. Unfortunately, I have a hard stop, but this was a fascinating discussion. Thank you so much, Samir. People who want to find your book, where should they go?

#Samir Saul

The publisher is called Baraka Books. B-A-R-A-K-A, Baraka. He's in Montreal and publishes in Montreal. So just type "Baraka Books," and it's there.

#Pascal

It will be available. I will, of course, put the links to this book in the description box below. Is there anywhere else you publish your work or anything like that?

#Samir Saul

I often publish in the international bulletin called Pressenza. Along with my colleague Michel Seymour, we publish a lot of articles on events as they unfold. And what we write corresponds largely to, you know, this analysis of imperialism that I put forward.

#Pascal

I will put the links in the description box below, and we will certainly have you back. Professor Samir Saul, thank you so much for your time today.

#Samir Saul

It was a pleasure. Thank you very much.