2. EMPIRE

Resource Imperialism after the West

> It may be asked whether the theory of imperialism should not take the world market as the *a priori* level of analysis from which conclusions might be drawn, rather than taking national capital and the state associated with it as its starting point.[1]
>
> Something larger than evil rules over these worlds.[2]
>
> Power is the very organization of this world, this engineered, configured, *purposed* world. That is the secret, *and it's that there isn't one*.[3]

Introduction

Capitalism is unique, Neil Smith considered, in that for the first time in history, human beings produce nature at a world scale.[4] When one looks at the sheer technological sophistication and the magnitude at which the mining industry wrests minerals from the soil to swiftly move them around by air, land, and sea, it becomes possible to start grasping the full extent of Smith's provocative assertion. The relentless robotization and computerization advanced by the mining industry during recent decades makes almost any other sector of social production today seem rudimentary at best. Although Google engineers have been testing prototypes for a self-driving car that could tentatively be released into the market at some point during the 2020s, mining companies have been operating with fully robotized vehicles since 2008. These driverless trucks, pioneered by BHP in association with the Japanese giant Komatsu, are fully autonomous and dwarf, in size and cargo capacity, any type of wheeled haulage machinery.[5] Besides autonomous trucks, mining companies have harnessed advances in robotics, control systems, and materials science in order to mechanize and computerize parts of the extraction process. This has allowed them to introduce automatic drills, smelters, locomotives, cranes, and other technological elements to diverse segments of the supply chain. Moreover, the introduction of geospatial information systems (GIS), artificial intelligence, and geological modeling tools to mineral forecasting has allowed companies to extract low-grade ore bodies profitably for the first time in history,

especially without the burden, timescales, and costs of drilling boreholes.[6] By making use of GIS, electromagnetic waves, and 3-D visualization methods imported from videogaming technologies, geologists and engineers can now develop very accurate representations of the subsurface in order to design the most effective mine plan.[7]

According to Ernest Mandel, each epochal shift in capitalist society demands a qualitative leap forward in the technical process, which can only be attained by means of a new generation of machines.[8] Major theories of global political economy in the Marxist tradition have typically considered epoch-making shifts and technological revolutions of the type Mandel described to go hand in hand with a new structure of geopolitical relations. Such relations are typically understood as driven by empire-building projects whereby a new "hegemon" mobilizes the powers of science and technology in order to achieve trade dominance. This was the claim advanced by the influential accounts of world-systems analysis[9] as well as by the related approaches of dependency theory and Latin American structuralism.[10] Studies of capitalism in the *longue durée* have associated the existing resource-extraction frontiers—sugarcane in the sixteenth century, peat in the eighteenth, rubber and coal in the nineteenth, oil and iron ore in the twentieth—with the pursuit for world dominance by Western imperial powers. The so-called "fourth industrial revolution,"[11] considered by pundits to be an era of technological innovation whose breadth and dynamism supersede those of previous historical epochs, seems to be lacking its proverbial hegemon. Yet, paradoxically, this allegedly postcolonial, postpolitical context has witnessed the expansion of mineral-extraction frontiers and the concomitant clearing of peasantries from the land to an extent that is entirely without precedent in human history.

This chapter sets out to solve such a paradox by arguing that existing studies have tended to confuse the political/historical forms of appearance of capitalist imperialism with their underlying content in the production and valorization of value, a process whose existence not only transcends the political mediation of domestic spheres of accumulation but *is ontologically prior* to them. The purpose of the chapter is therefore to posit the world market (not the nation-state or even the interstate system) as the analytical starting point from which the nature of resource imperialism can be most adequately fleshed out. This entails an analytical dissection of the "fetishized" or "alienated" imperialist political forms, which are sensuous and fragmented (e.g., militarization, debt peonage, internal colonialism, dependency), from their essential foundations in the movement of value, a process that is suprasensuous and systemic. Philosophically speaking, this entails capturing how the essential level (the total surplus value of society) acquires phenomenal reality in sensuous experience via the messy materialities and entanglements of firms and states. The reading proposed here is thus inspired by Marx's appropriation of the Hegelian conception of the inverted world, which posits reality as the unity of two contradictory movements.[12] For Marx, capital is a "sensuous supersensible thing." This means that the reality of liberal society is a product of the movement of opposites, between self-determined activity and its independent appearance in the autonomized forms of political power.[13] The categorical critique that this chapter proposes involves deciphering the practical and human content that underlies such alienated forms.

To develop a reading of the production of resource frontiers in the context of global capital accumulation, I build upon value-theoretical interpretations of the world economy whose methodological approach has consisted of a logical progression from the determination of the total surplus value of society—the world market—to its organization into individual parts—national economies and individual capitals.[14] Some of these approaches, the chapter shows, have emerged not only from the form-analysis tradition, but also from a radical strand of Latin American theories of dependency, which has considered class relations to precede those of the nation-state.[15] On this basis, and as opposed to dominant readings, the chapter argues that resource imperialism is not autonomously determined by the locational strategies of transnational firms or by the political dynamics of the nation-state. According to Vivek Chibber, one of the most salient aspects of the classical theories of imperialism that emerged in the context of the Second International was that they sought to decipher the deep economic forces that underpinned what on the surface appeared to be autonomous political projects.[16] With this, I intend to shift the focus from political theories of imperialism to those that place a greater emphasis on economic and systemic determinations. Accordingly, developing a theory of imperialism that takes seriously the essential unity of global capital accumulation is a matter of intellectual and political urgency, especially in the context of a new international division of labor that destabilizes the geometries of power of an interstate system originally structured around global North/global South and West/non-West binaries.[17]

In the first section of the chapter, I briefly review how major intellectual traditions have traditionally considered the making of resource peripheries as linked to empire-building projects and, more generally, to the direct political-economic relations of an interstate system. By means of Mandel's periodization of industrial capitalism,[18] I excavate the scientific-technological revolutions that have enabled access to raw materials across previous historical cycles of accumulation. The second section goes on to assess the historical specificity of what I term the *fourth machine age*. This advance in modern science and technology, I argue, has been crucial in the processes that have repositioned the gravitational center of the world economy toward the Pacific Ocean. In the third section, the chapter builds upon value-theoretical readings of global capitalism in order to lay out an alternative framework of resource imperialism that can grasp the nature of capitalism as a planetary socionatural system but also takes seriously the evolving forms of political authority and extraeconomic force that mediate its complex metabolism. The final section grounds and spatializes these theoretical insights by exploring the spaces of extraction that have emerged as the Asian Tigers consolidate themselves as the world's main buyers of raw materials.

Empire and Technologies of Extraction

An exploration of the colonial histories and geographies of the last six centuries reveals how natural-resource frontiers are internally related to the constitution of the very fabric of modernity. Without the fabulous material wealth drawn from the sugarcane plantations of

Brazil and the silver mines of Potosí (now in Bolivia) in the sixteenth century, for example, the cultural, artistic and political efflorescence that characterized the so-called Golden Century of the Habsburg dynasty in the Iberian Peninsula would have never existed. Likewise, the first industrial revolution that took place in nineteenth-century England would have been unthinkable without the rubber, guano, and coal frontiers that dramatically expanded across the Atlantic Ocean in order to feed machines, crops, and workers in the heartland of the British Empire. World-systems analysis is perhaps one of the most, if not the most, influential intellectual traditions explaining such relations of interdependence in the configuration of the space economy of capitalism. Immanuel Wallerstein, a key proponent of this strand of thought, starts from the assumption that states are the expression of power in a capitalist world economy as they enforce the appropriation of value from the bourgeois class.[19] As a fractured and uneven system, such appropriation of value unfolds along constant pressure from the strong against the weak, and thus a polarized system of "core" and "peripheral" states is summoned into existence.[20] The political relations of imperialist expansion, so the argument goes, translate into economic relations of unequal exchange between cores and peripheries.[21]

Such world systems are dispersed across space but also across time, and for this reason one of the key features of world-systems analysis is its opposition to the so-called "two-century model" that views the capital form as an offspring of the first industrial revolution of the nineteenth century. Giovanni Arrighi's influential account of systemic cycles of accumulation explains the genesis and evolution of world systems in the *longue durée*, with the fifteenth century as its starting point. For him, the initial formation and subsequent expansion of the world system to its present global all-encompassing dimensions can be broken down into four, partly overlapping systemic cycles of accumulation: a Genoese-Iberian cycle that stretches from the fifteenth through the early seventeenth; a Dutch cycle, stretching from the late sixteenth century to the late eighteenth; a British cycle, stretching from the mid-eighteenth century to the early twentieth; and a US cycle, stretching from the late nineteenth century to what he saw as the wave of economic expansion taking place in the late twentieth and early twenty-first.[22] In Arrighi's formulation, a systemic cycle is superseded once an emergent core state is able to consolidate itself by means of material and financial expansion and achieve trade dominance.

The inherited epistemological frameworks and historical assumptions introduced by world-systems analysis have been fundamental to how primary-commodity production has been understood across disciplines and intellectual traditions. Stephen Bunker and Paul Ciccantell's "new historical materialist" study of natural resource frontiers, for example, is directly anchored to Arrighi's formulation of systemic cycles of accumulation.[23] However, Bunker and Ciccantell depart from Arrighi's reading because they place the gravitational focus not on finance but on primary commodities. The crux of the question, these authors argue, lies in the capacity of ascending imperial powers to secure and maintain access to raw materials through scientific and technological innovation.[24] As industries in the "core" become more capitalized and the ratio of dead labor to living labor rises along with productivity, access to an increasing amount of resources in increasingly remote

"peripheries" needs to be secured. This imposes the need to reduce transport costs, so a characteristic feature of each systemic cycle of accumulation is that the ascending economy is able to introduce technological innovations that allow for an increase in the scale and efficiency of transport.[25] Larger and more efficient ships, ports, railways, warehouses, and other forms of transport infrastructure, according to Bunker and Ciccantell, have played fundamental roles in the competition of states for global trade dominance.

The ascent of the Dutch to trade dominance, for example, was to a large extent a result of the introduction of technologies to maneuver oak and pine wood in order to build lighter and more efficient hulls—the Dutch *fluyt*.[26] In this dawn of modern technics, which Lewis Mumford terms the *eotechnic phase*, the water-and-wood industrial complex set the foundations for experimental science on mathematics, exact measurement, and timing.[27] The shift to the *paleotechnic phase*—which in Mandel's periodization corresponds to the first technological revolution—built upon the previous scientific revolutions and inaugurated a coal-and-iron complex that relied on new resources such as aluminum, cassiterite, manganese, petroleum, and rubber. The production of automatic systems of machinery feeding upon and at the same time expanding these new resource frontiers, Bunker and Ciccantell argue, allowed the British to achieve trade dominance and set into motion a new systemic cycle of accumulation.[28] Innovations in motor design allowed them to introduce mechanized ships that gradually but irrevocably doomed the sailing ships inherited from the previous systemic cycle.[29] This opened new possibilities for expanding resource peripheries in more remote geographies. Rubber, in particular, performed key mechanical functions in conveyor belts, pads for moving parts that rubbed against each other, insulation for cables, and tires for wheels that made machines mobile. The rubber boom that followed the consolidation of the British Empire, Bunker and Ciccantell note, vastly reconfigured the geography of the Amazon, producing major social and environmental destruction.[30] The British Empire remained unchallenged until the United States pioneered the process of Bessemer conversion for iron-ore smelting, which made durable steel that was cheap enough for mass production.[31]

Bessemer steel production facilitated unprecedented mechanization of agriculture, extraction, and industry, as well as the rapid transport of raw materials that consolidated the US as a new imperial power after the mid-nineteenth century.[32] Maximum ore cargos increased from 1,000 tons in the 1870s to 3,000 tons when the first steel ships were built in 1886.[33] The invention and proliferation of the internal-combustion engine, which for Mandel marks the "second technological revolution," allowed the US to further improve transport technologies and substantially reduce the turnover times of capital. Iron-ore mines swelled in size and grew in numbers after these key technological breakthroughs, which ensured US hegemony until Japan devised new computerized technologies for iron-ore smelting, which in turn dramatically improved ships in both propulsion and cargo capacity. The systemic cycle that Bunker and Ciccantell ascribe to the ascendancy of Japan corresponds to the "third technological revolution" (electronic and nuclear-powered apparatuses) in Mandel's periodization.

Despite their differences in scope and method, what cuts across these world-systems

perspectives on resource extraction is that they are underpinned by a deeply rooted methodological nationalism that views these historical transformations as a result of interactions between states or systems of states. In general terms, methodological nationalism has been understood as a metatheoretical orientation that conflates society with the state and the national territory. Most importantly, though, it has also been understood as an approach that isolates internal and external factors in explanations of development, giving more prevalence to the former.[34] As Brenner suggests, although Wallerstein's concept of the modern world system is framed on the basis of an attempt to supersede state-centric models of capitalist modernity, national territories remain pivotal within the whole theoretical edifice.[35] Although the division of labor in the capitalist world economy is considered to be structured in accordance with three supranational zones (core, periphery, semiperiphery), Wallerstein's reading consistently places the focus on the specific historical trajectories and dynamics of nation-states. Transnational corporations, infrastructural megadevelopments, and circuits of capital, according to Brenner, remain secondary in Wallerstein's approach.[36] In the end, the primary geographical units of global space remain defined by the territorial boundaries of domestic spheres of accumulation.

A very similar methodological and metatheoretical orientation informs other predominant approaches to natural-resource governance and extraction, such as theories of natural-resource curse, ecological economics, and the Latin American schools of structuralism, dependency theory, and *post-extractivismo*. Latin American structuralism is perhaps the most influential intellectual tradition of this group. Its most renowned author was the Argentinean economist Raúl Prebisch, who also served as the executive director of the United Nations' Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) in the 1950s. Prebisch's ideas, it should be pointed out, were formative in Wallerstein's theorization of the modern world system[37] and in the theories of dependency that emerged from the 1960s onward.[38] The basic tenet of the structuralist framework, according to Cristóbal Kay is that international commerce reproduces the inequalities between the center and the periphery.[39] This theoretical framework was devised by ECLAC structuralist economists to make sense of the incorporation of Latin American nations into the international division of labor as suppliers of raw materials. The common thread that cuts across all such approaches, according to recent critiques, is a presupposition of the nation-state as internally constituted by its own domestic context.[40] Accordingly, international commerce is therefore construed as being the process of interaction between these abstractly autonomous spheres of national accumulation. As Enrique Dussel explains, Latin American theories of dependency gave prevalence to the surface appearance of dependency—i.e., its historical manifestation in underdeveloped economies. This, in his view, led to a state-centric reading of the interstate system that was oblivious to the operation of the law of value on a world scale—its essence.[41]

The Fourth Machine Age and the Rise of an Asia-Centered World System

The rise of China and other Asian Tigers, coupled with the demise of formal colonization after the 1970s, puts into question the types of state-centric and core–periphery readings of the capitalist world system that have informed major studies of extraction. One of the most striking particularities of the commodity supercycle of recent decades is that, for the first time in modern history, the vast material wealth that is wrested from mines, oil wells, and croplands, is shipped to countries traditionally considered "peripheral" or "semiperipheral." The stunning economic growth and industrial transformation of the various generations of East Asian economies, combined with the emergence of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa)—which command a growing share of world trade—has expanded the volume of raw materials circulating in both financial and spot markets and shifted its geographical focus toward a more "South-South" configuration.[42] The exponential increase in manufactured goods traded at the global level, which rose from around $2 trillion in 1980 to nearly $16 trillion in 2000,[43] attests to this cyclopean shift in the scale of capitalist production. The geographical distribution of this increase in manufacturing capacity is why some commentators now refer to the twenty-first century as the "Pacific Century."[44] From 1990 to 2012, Asia's share of global manufacturing rose from 25 percent to 50 percent, and it is estimated that this figure will continue to grow during the next decades.[45]

East Asian economies, initially considered mere export-processing zones for Western transnational corporations,[46] have managed to revolutionize instruments and relations of production and emancipate themselves from "captive" global supply chains.[47] China, a relative latecomer to this process, has also been successfully combining export-oriented industrialization with an emphasis on "indigenous innovation" (*zìzhǔ chuàngxīn*).[48] This, it has been argued, has altered the power dynamics and the governance composition of global manufacturing in ways that no one would have foreseen even a few decades ago.[49] In other words, China and other East Asian economies are no longer mere recipients of foreign direct investment advanced for the development of special economic zones or world-market factories specialized in low-value-added, unskilled labor (a "semiperiphery" in Wallerstein's phraseology). Rather, they have been at the forefront of technological innovation and industrial upgrading based on the aggressive capitalization and robotization of the production line. China's "robot revolution," which consists of introducing fully autonomous factories that operate without need of lights (as opposed to humans, robots can work in the dark), is one of the latest installments in the modernizing project inaugurated by the Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2006–2011) and in the Long-Term Plan for the Development of Science and Technology.[50]

The rise of China, according to Ho-fung Hung, marks a clear turning point in geopolitical configurations inherited from classical international divisions of labor because, unlike earlier "tigers" (such as Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea), China is not a client or vassal state of the US but has emerged as "an independent geopolitical and military force capable of challenging the United States."[51] Besides military prowess, Chinese financial institutions now rank among the most powerful in the world, and China's monetary system has become a strong counterweight to international financial institutions involved in sovereign lending, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Inter-American

Development Bank.[52] Underlying this major transfer of geopolitical power from the West to the non-West is the leap forward in the automation and computerization of the labor process that Klaus Schwab, founder of the World Economic Forum, terms "the fourth industrial revolution."[53] Given its scale, scope, and complexity, Schwab asserts that the present industrial revolution is "unlike anything humankind has experienced before."[54] Its distinctiveness does not necessarily emerge from novel technological innovations such as mobile electronic devices, digital fabrication, artificial intelligence (AI), big data, nanotechnology, biotechnology, the internet of things, robotics, materials science, and quantum computing. Although still in their infancy, such technologies have already made key breakthroughs across economic, cultural, and social realms. For Schwab, the specificity of the fourth industrial revolution stems from the systematic fusion and interaction of such technologies across the physical, digital, and biological domains.

In the mining industry, the productive articulation between robotics, biotechnology, AI, GIS, and control systems has revolutionized the process of extraction as we know it. For example, an autonomous mining truck operates with an average of 1,000 sensors. This allows it to maintain constant communication with its environment, with other machines, and with engineers working across other phases of the extraction process.[55] Another example is that the employment of engineered microorganisms to break the resistance of recalcitrant ores that cannot be extracted through traditional methods, as Labban shows, has rendered mining a biologically based industry and has even extended the process of extraction at the cellular-elemental scale.[56] Yet, for synthetic bacteria to be applied to the extraction of low-grade ore bodies, a large-scale haulage system with the capacity to mobilize massive volumes of rock first needs to be in place. For autonomous trucks and shovels to even begin to move large volumes of rock, in turn, mineral deposits must first be made "legible" by GIS and sophisticated geological-modeling and data-processing tools. In other words, the capital-intensive mine is not an exclusive product of robots, GIS, microorganisms, control systems, or laborers, but of the synergistic integration between the productive capacities of these human and extrahuman elements. As a result, mineral deposits that had not been mined because they were "uneconomical" under older technologies are now being reopened and transformed into large mines across every corner of the world, putting enormous pressure upon water sources, livelihoods, and communities.[57]

The ability to mine low-grade mineral deposits has made the mining industry more profitable and has increased the material footprint of mineral extraction by a factor of around 1,000 (in terms of the ratio of solid waste produced per gram of mineral extracted).[58] To the extent that the increase in labor productivity enabled by these technologies has unfolded alongside the aggressive plundering and depletion of planetary ecosystems, the fourth industrial revolution Schwab describes is essentially suboptimal and unrevolutionary.[59] This dubious technological "revolution," Moore argues, has nonetheless been able to bring about transformations that are unrivaled in scale and scope, such as the "conversion of the global South into a 'world farm,' the industrialization of the south, and the radical externalization of biogeophysical costs, giving rise to everything from cancer epidemics to global warming."[60] Although atypical when compared with previous industrial revolutions, the aforementioned

transformations indicate that contemporary industrial technology has already summoned into existence the most advanced and pervasive iteration of machinofacturing yet. This has reconfigured the modes of organizing social forms of labor and the process of social reproduction to such an extent that it would be consistent to refer to it as a *fourth machine age* on the basis of Mandel's periodization.[61]

The modalities of functional integration across the domains of production, circulation, and consumption of social wealth that have been enabled by the current industrial era, then, demand more open and exploratory theoretical engagements with the notion of the nation-state. Indeed, the pitfalls of methodological nationalism have most clearly manifested in the confusion of recent literature on resource extraction, which has faced significant difficulties in interpreting the rise of China and other Asian economies through the lenses of world-systems analysis and related frameworks. In some accounts, it is far from clear whether China has acquired the status of "hegemon" or even if it continues to be a periphery/semiperiphery at all. Others argue that China has assumed the role of the United States as the new global superpower, and as a result has transformed Latin American countries into its resource peripheries.[62] For Bolinaga and Slipak, for example, the "Washington Consensus" that once subordinated Latin American economies to the interests of the United States has been replaced by what they term a "Beijing Consensus": the compromise to supply cheap raw materials to China.[63] As was the case with the US, these authors point out, the Beijing Consensus is much more of an imposition than a consensus, and thus the core-periphery model continues to be reproduced under a different façade. The political reductionism of such approaches, it is worth insisting, confuse appearance with essence and end up obfuscating the real social determinations that animate the commodity supercycle. For these reasons, the section that follows argues that technological upgrading in the extractive industries thus present us with the challenge of unthinking modern society against and beyond its existing conceptuality.

Imperialism as Political Form

Marx's original scheme for his exposition of the critique of political economy included a final volume whose central theme would be the world market. As is well known, he only managed to write three of all the projected volumes encompassed by his original 1857 outline. From the very beginning, however, Marx conceptualized capitalist society as a world system, so for him the world market was the place "in which production is posited as a totality together will all its moments."[64] It is therefore the place where total social capital becomes inverted into the alienated subject of the process of social reproduction in its unity —the realization by capital of itself as a totalizing and totalized subject.[65] The idea behind the Marxian concept of the world market is that the total surplus value of society—itself a product of myriad embodied acts of production and exchange—is determined prior to its distribution among individual capitals and states. The world market, Bonefeld argues, is the most developed form of this abstract interconnectedness.[66] This means the global economy

should not be understood as an aggregation of national economies. Rather, the latter are most adequately conceptualized as the modes of existence assumed by the former, whose reality springs from the actual, material metabolism of social life.

The world market is therefore not an abstract substance or "structure" that is either transcendent or somehow extrinsic to human experience. In fact, Marx intended the idea of the world market to express the primacy of the concrete corporeality of the sum total of the vast multitude of labors living under the geographies of capitalist society, before it assumes distorted forms in international political relations and inter-capitalist competition. In the introduction to the 1978 edition of volume 2 of *Capital*, Ernest Mandel argues that "it was only by dealing with the reproduction of capital *in its totality* that Marx could bring out in their full complexity the inevitable contradictions of the basic cell of capitalist wealth, the commodity."[67] One of the most insightful treatments of this aspect of the critique of political economy may be the one developed by the Argentinean philosopher Enrique Dussel in his 1988 book *Hacia un Marx desconocido: un comentario de los manuscritos del 61–63* (published in English in 2001 under the title *Towards an Unknown Marx*). Dussel attempts to elucidate the global nature of capitalism through an exploration of the recently discovered *Manuscripts of 1861–63*, where Marx reflects on the logical structure of the three volumes of *Capital* and on the centrality of the question of distribution. On the basis of Hegel's idea of the inverted world,[68] Dussel expounds how prices, rents, and profits constitute the phenomenal or sensuous manifestation of essential being, which is value. It is through the process of distribution via circulation, competition, and sale that the essential level (surplus value) acquires phenomenal reality in profit.[69] The political mediations of the interstate system would then constitute the historical or phenomenal expressions of the distribution of the total surplus value of society.

For Dussel, most of the theories of dependency that emerged throughout the 1960s in Latin America and beyond were substantially flawed because they confused the essence of dependency (transfers of surplus value) with its multiple, phenomenal, historical appearances (international political relations).[70] The approach proposed by Dussel, it is worth mentioning, shares important elements with that of other radical Latin American theorists of dependency, such as Ruy Mauro Marini and Agustín Cueva. Despite the particularities and internal nuances of each of these authors, they all strove to overcome the shortcomings that methodological nationalism brings to the study of dependency, and rooted the political dynamics of the interstate system on the exploitation of labor-power and the production of relative surplus value.[71] Marini's approach to dependency is perhaps the most influential and illustrative in this regard. For Marini, the possibility for "developed" nations to establish capital-intensive industrial systems oriented toward the production of relative surplus value was premised upon the "super-exploitation" of the laboring classes in "underdeveloped" nations, where production was organized on the basis of the extraction of absolute surplus value from labor-intensive production of raw materials and foodstuffs.[72]

In considering the essence of dependency to be the transfers of surplus value between "dominant" and "dependent" national economies, however, authors such as Dussel, Cueva, and Marini could not fully supersede the political reductionism or state-centrism that they set

out to criticize. However, Dussel's method of developing a logical progression from the determination of the total surplus value of society—the *global* total social capital—toward the determination of its individual parts—firms and states—offers fundamental insights for making sense of the geopolitical context that leads to the contemporary organization of extraction.[73] More recently, and also on the basis of a Hegelian reinterpretation of Marx's concept of the world market, a group of Latin American scholars have revisited the thesis of the international division of labor in order to rethink some of the key assumptions and implications of dependency theory.[74] These authors are associated with the Buenos Aires-Based Centro para la Investigación como Crítica Práctica (CICP), under the direction of the Argentinean scholar Juan Iñigo Carrera. In contrast to Dussel, they suggest that the immanent content that governs the dynamics of the NIDL (its *essence*) is not dependency but the production of relative surplus value at the world scale, and the fragmentation of the productive subjectivity of the international working class.[75]

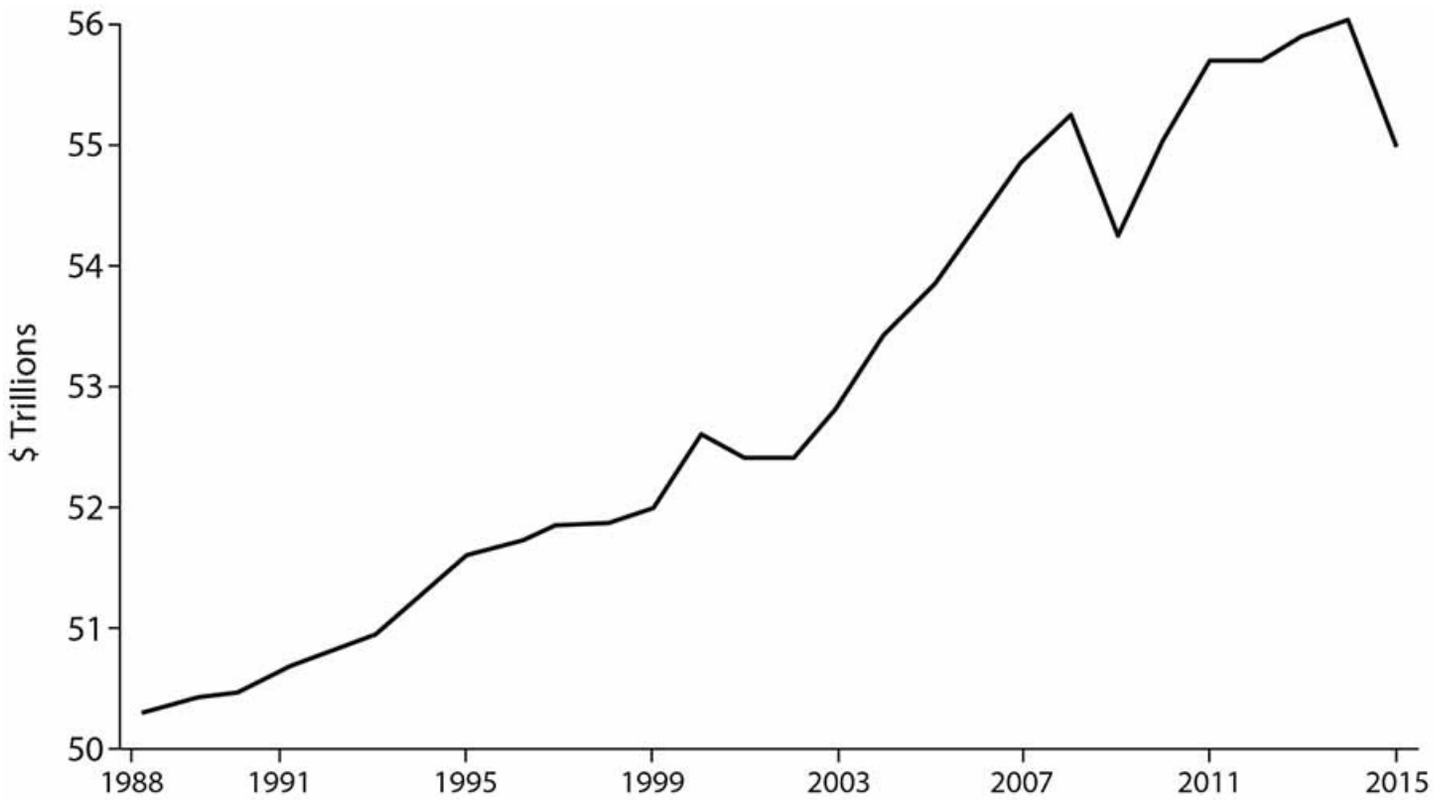
It is in the contradictory and crisis-ridden tendency to constantly revolutionize the technological basis of the forces of production where, according to Starosta, the foundation for the evolving, uneven spatial differentiation of the international division of labor should be sought.[76] Such is the general content expressed by means of the evolving political forms of national policy and international competition. The pathways of national development across East Asian economies during recent decades illustrate this. In the 1950s, the garment and clothing industries in the West offshored parts of their production to Japan. In the 1970s, as the Japanese laboring classes became more skilled and were put in charge of more complex tasks—such as microelectronics assembly, automobile manufacturing, etc.—the cheaper and less complex parts of the labor process began to be relocated to Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, and Singapore. A similar process ensued with this first generation of Asian Tigers, which put pressure on capitalists to relocate tasks of low complexity yet again—and the latent surplus populations of Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia became the new frontier for capitalist commodification in the early 1980s. A further round of incorporations took place after the 1980s that included Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Mauritius, among some of the other states now known as "tiger-cub economies."[77]

Although China is a newcomer to this transnational and frenzied process of mass proletarianization, its incorporation in the 1990s constituted an event of world-historical significance. The social composition and sheer size of its latent surplus populations (migrant and indebted peasants), coupled with the iron fist of China's Communist Party, produced the largest industrial proletariat the world has ever seen. It is estimated that around 400 million peasants have been incorporated into the expanding constellations of China's industrial towns and cities since Deng Xiaoping's landmark 1992 southern tour speech.[78] The speed and intensity at which these contradictory and crisis-ridden tendencies are playing out in contemporary China are astonishing. As Hao Ren vividly illustrates,[79] the landscapes of worker contestation in China have been torn asunder by simultaneous forces of industrialization and deindustrialization, as capital relocates some parts of the labor process toward the country's interior and to India and other countries. In the Pearl River Delta, for example, some workers mobilize in capital-intensive factories demanding higher wages,

while others—literally a few kilometers away—protest next to abandoned factories for severance compensation and unpaid wages.[80] Local governments in industrial areas across China, according to Ren, are less interested in retaining low-end manufacturers and prefer to attract capital-intensive production. This means that the emphasis is deliberately placed on relative surplus value (i.e., fixed capital), not on absolute surplus value (i.e., variable capital/living labor).

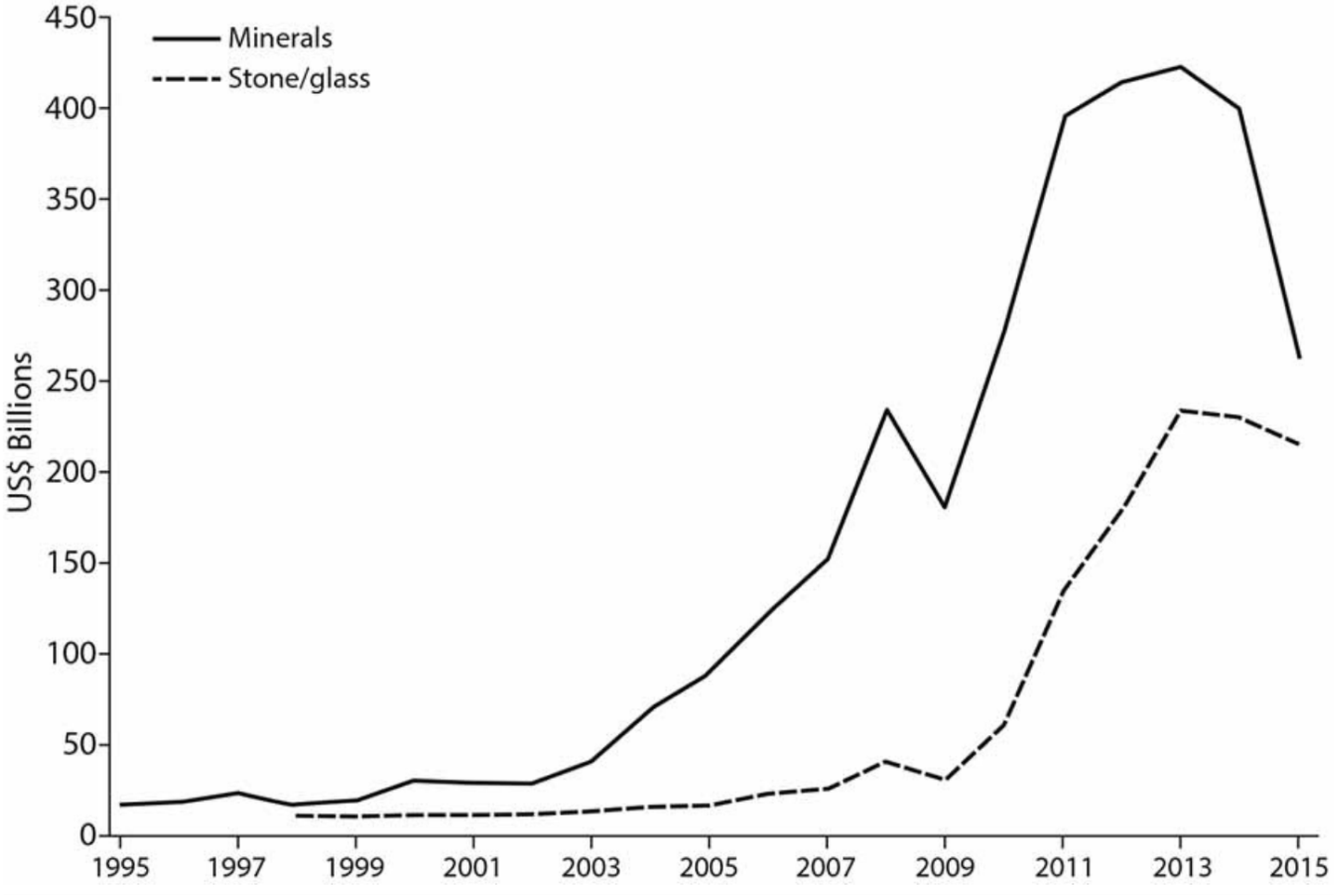
Placing the emphasis on the system-wide production of relative surplus value, therefore, explains how the endless pursuit for ever-increasing levels of productivity gives rise to a society that, according to Postone, is directionally dynamic. Although social, Postone explains that the "treadmill effect" unleashed by the self-expansion of value becomes independent from human will and acquires an objective, lawlike quality.[81] Figure 3 illustrates this treadmill effect in the aggressive tendency toward mechanization taking place during the last two decades, especially as expressed in world exports of machinery and electrical equipment. After 2001, when China began to secure access to raw materials abroad systematically, the volume of machinery exports increased by leaps and bounds with respect to its previous variability (see also figure 4, which shows the evolution of China's imports of raw materials). Ever since the publication of *Technics and Civilization* in 1934, Rosalind Williams suggests, Lewis Mumford searched frantically for images that could express the all-encompassing nature of the expanding technological environment, of the sort encapsulated in figure 2.[82] In the 1960s, Mumford continued to reflect on the encroaching mechanization of social existence and invented the term *megatechnics* to highlight that human civilization was moving toward the development of a "uniform, all-enveloping structure,"[83] perhaps akin to the "cosmic megastructures" that theoretical physicists refer to as Dyson spheres.[84]

Figure 2 Total world exports of machinery and electrical equipment, 1988–2015



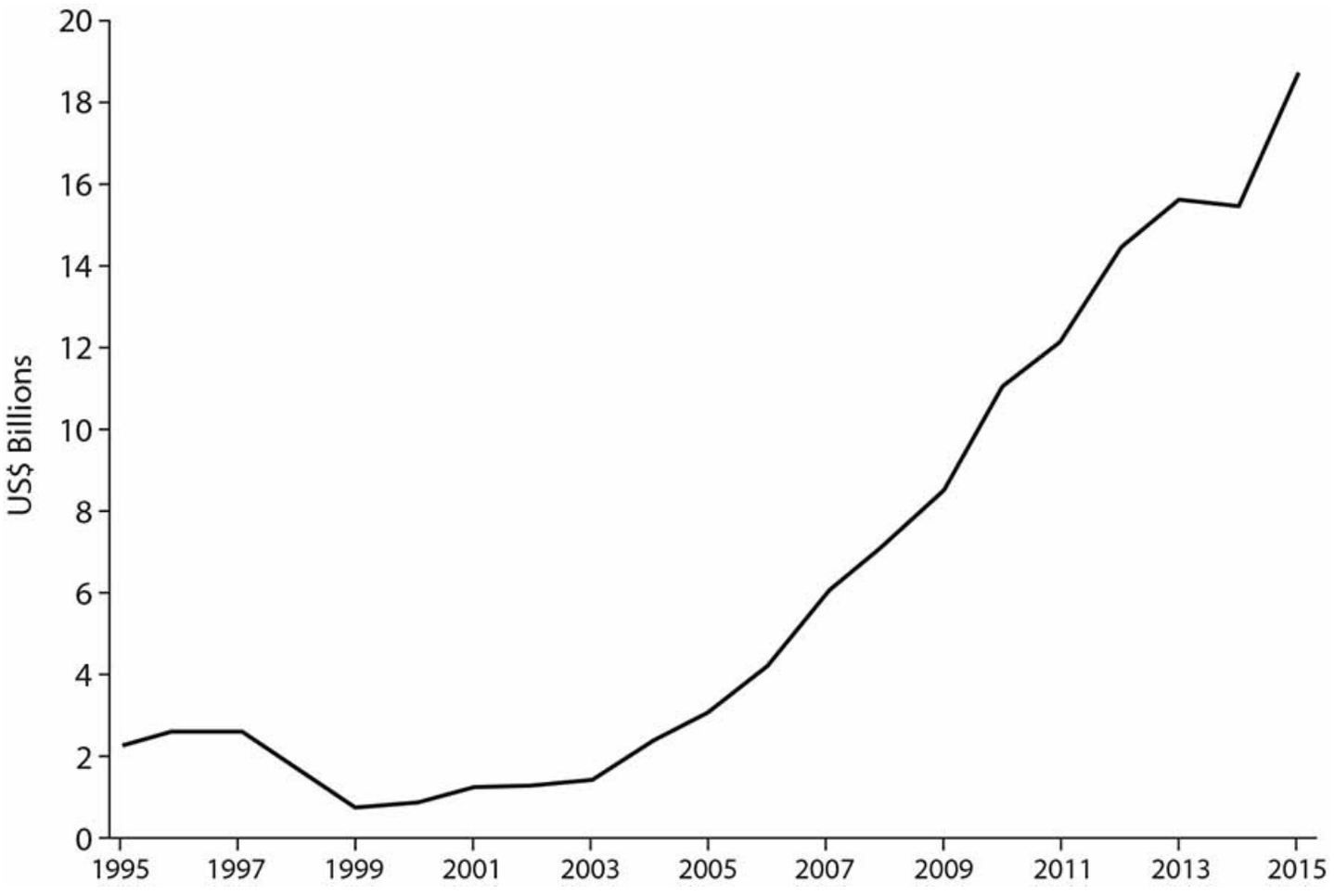
Source: Data from the World Integrated Trade Solution—WITS.

Figure 3 China's imports of minerals and stone/glass, 1995–2015



Source: Atlas of Economic Complexity.

Figure 4 China's imports of foodstuffs, 1995–2015



Source: Atlas of Economic Complexity.

Trying to identify an "empire-building project" or a quest for "world domination" by China, any other Asian state, or the US as the true explanation for these fragmenting, self-actualizing powers would be tantamount to mistaking a symptom for the disease. The foundations of the uneven spatial differentiation of global capitalism, Starosta points out, must instead be searched for "in the changing forms of the exploitation of the global working class by the total social capital through the transformation of the material forms of the capitalist labor process."[85] To reiterate, this is the essential content of a process that acquires phenomenal reality in the sensuous materialities of corporate practices and state policy—which, of course, often present themselves as imperialist practice or regulatory strategies. The implications of this approach for understanding the shifting geographies of resource extraction in Latin America and beyond are fundamental. According to Caligaris, the constitution of a national sphere geared toward raw materials exports only makes sense if cheapening the commodities it supplies results in a lower value of labor-power exploited by the total social capital.[86] In a similar vein, Moore suggests that world ecological revolutions emerge from the necessity of the total social capital to reduce the system-wide cost of reproducing the working classes in order to increase productivity.[87] Cheap energy and cheap food, according to Moore, have been historically furthered by the application of

technological revolutions to primary-commodity production—mainly agriculture—henceforth enabling new phases of world accumulation and capitalist development.

This does not imply that state mediations have ceased to be relevant or that the process of accumulation is contingent upon minimal state intervention, as dominant approaches to globalization portend. In the fourth machine age, access to raw materials continues to be systematically secured by extraeconomic means. As the next section and the next chapters will illustrate in detail, police trucks, water cannons, surveillance cameras, tear gas, and barbed wire continue to be constitutive elements of the landscape of extraction in postcolonial Latin America. Indigenous peoples, peasants, and other subaltern groups continue to experience the expansion of natural resource frontiers through a corporeal phenomenology of imperial domination, expressed in violent expulsion, environmental racism, and everyday intimidation by police, military, and paramilitary forces. Accordingly, understanding the alienated political forms in which the production of relative surplus value at the world scale is concretely actualized continues to be a crucial element in anticapitalist thought and action. As Bonefeld rightly suggests, the state is "the political form of market liberty."[88] The economy has no existence in itself, so it requires a strong institutional basis in order to actualize and *enforce* its existence through police, military, and carceral regimes. Market freedom, therefore, presupposes the political state and is premised on the state as its authority.[89]

An approach that posits the social constitution of the total surplus value of society as the prior reality upon which national economies are later determined as their moving parts, however, challenges established understandings of imperialism. As McNally argues, accounts that consider capitalist imperialism to be the result of two distinct logics of power—one capitalist and one territorial—are unable to make adequate sense of the social dynamics of impersonal power that are intrinsic to capital as the alienated subject of the historical movement of modern society.[90] In these accounts, a political body that operates in "territorial space" is juxtaposed with a capitalist class that exists in "economic space" as methodologically distinct.[91] At the heart of these differentiations between politics and economics is a dualistic reading of base and superstructure that obfuscates the essential unity of the two in the capitalist production of space.

One of the most remarkable insights that emerged from the work of authors associated with the Second International and the tradition of Monopoly Capitalism is that they were sensitive to the economic foundations that underpinned and gave momentum to the process of political imperialism. To cite a well-known example, Rosa Luxemburg conceptualized imperialism as the political manifestation of the process by which capital sustains its process of enlarged reproduction by appropriating the noncapitalist environment or "outside."[92] In Luxemburg's work, however, the noncapitalist outside (periphery) was construed in eminently territorial terms, basically because capitalism was considered a relatively local socionatural system at the time. Imperialism, for her, was therefore first and foremost manifested via territorial expansion through colonization, pillaging, and military incursions. If the material constitution of the world market forecloses the possibility of subsequent territorial expansion, then the production of peripheries shifts the emphasis from spatial

extension to *intensification;* hence the relevance of Marx's distinction between the formal and the real subsumption of labor to capital.[93]

The production of relative surplus value in a context of real subsumption, Mezzadra and Neilson contend, opens a new perspective "on the continuous production of this constitutive outside … that can continue well beyond the point when territories literally lying outside the domination of capital no longer exist."[94] Under a materialist understanding of resource extraction, the periphery should therefore no longer be expressed exclusively in terms of a geographical relation; it is also eminently a social and temporal relation. This means that capital's constitutive outside can no longer be cast in terms of a straightforward North/South or West/non-West divide. Rather, cores and peripheries need to be understood as *immanent* to the capitalist production of space. The coming of age of a global sphere of accumulation, however, has not banished imperialism as a political practice, as some authors have been quick to point out.[95] From its dark genesis in the transatlantic slave trade of the sixteenth century and the parliamentary enclosures of seventeenth-century England, the modern mode of production has been contingent on the exercise of political force, the locus of which has historically been—and continues to be—the capitalist state. For this reason the expansion of resource frontiers across Latin America persistently expresses itself in the fetishized form of imperialist and subimperialist practice, even though its real necessity is in the "elsewhere" of its essential content. The next section now turns to elucidating the dialectical interaction between spaces of extraction in Latin America and their concomitant geopolitical forms.

The Geopolitics of the Planetary Mine in Latin America and Beyond

Reflecting on the geological metabolism of the affluent skyline of San Francisco, Gray Brechin suggests that modern cities are technologically, philosophically, and economically the "inverted mines" of distant resource hinterlands: mineral wealth excavated from the bowels of the earth and then fixed in the urban built environment.[96] Thinking of cities as "inverted mines," then, warrants asking what sorts of spaces of extraction are behind the fantastically alien skylines of Asian megacities, some of which seem to have been transplanted directly from the cyberpunk universes of sci-fi classics such as *Blade Runner* and *Ghost in the Shell*. According to Stephen Graham, the futuristic lightscapes assembled by Shanghai's "leap into the sky" are nothing less than the aesthetic and material manifestations of "the greatest concerted construction of vertical architecture in human history."[97] That China has recently become the major importer of raw materials in the world is therefore unsurprising. When the Communist Party assumed power in 1949, China had sixty-nine cities; today it has 658.[98] Also, it is estimated that over the next twenty years China will build hundreds of new cities, thousands of new towns and districts, and more than 50,000 new skyscrapers.[99] The country's voracious hunger for raw materials has led it to embark on a Promethean project to cast a wide net of logistical infrastructures across the seas, rivers, deserts, and mountain ranges of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This leads Parag Khanna to argue that China "is not 'buying the world' per se but *building it* in exchange for natural

resources."[100] Figure 3 illustrates the exponential increase in China's imports of minerals after the turn of the century.

Although Chinese investment for primary-commodity production has had a much more marked presence in Africa so far, China has already become the main commercial partner for many Latin American economies. The growing density and breadth of this trans-Pacific industrial metabolism is starkly manifested in the evolving balance of trade between China and Latin America, which has grown exponentially in recent years, going from $15 billion in 2000 to $200 billion in 2011.[101] As of 2013, South America supplied 60 percent of Chinese soybean imports, 80 percent of fishmeal, 60 percent of poultry meats, and 45 percent of grapes.[102] Just to put China's soybean consumption in global perspective: the US, Argentina, and Brazil produce 80 percent of the world's soybean yield, half of which is then exported to China.[103] These figures should not be surprising, considering that the sprawling growth of complex constellations of manufacturing towns ("township village enterprises"—TVEs) and cities in China, coupled with impoverishment and the destruction of livelihoods in the countryside, have transformed hundreds of millions of "free" peasants into wage-laborers. As the previous section suggested, the shifting modes of existence of the fragments of the global working class—paradigmatically exemplified in the social reproduction of the Chinese industrial proletariat as expressed in food consumption (see figure 4)—constitute the underlying determination for the production resource peripheries.

Paradoxically, securing the material conditions for the social reproduction of the swelling Chinese proletariat—composed mainly of displaced rural populations—has hinged upon the mass displacement of Latin American peasantries. Producing cheap food to feed the newly proletarianized populations in Asia, then, cannot be disentangled from the deforestation of the Amazon and the Chaco regions to make way for agroindustrial investment projects; from the cancer epidemics and malformations of communities destroyed by unrestrained use of glyphosate for transgenic soybean crops in the Argentinean Pampa; from the pervasive effects of the antibiotics and disease in maritime ecosystems and food chains endemic to industrialized aquaculture in Chile. The dialectic of implosion and explosion at the heart of contemporary approaches to planetary urbanization is nowhere more clearly manifested than in such relational geographies.[104]

Systemic pressures for the mining industry to become increasingly capital intensive also respond to the dramatic increase in demand that has followed the industrial expansion and urbanization taking place across East Asian economies. The tendencies toward technological upgrading, mechanization and material expansion of mining sites have had a direct repercussion on the overall volume of mineral exports. In 1990, Chile produced 16 percent of the world's copper; during the early 2000s it almost doubled its production, supplying 30 percent of world copper consumed.[105] From being almost marginal in the early 1990s, Chile's exports of raw materials to China have skyrocketed. Exports of copper, for example, increased from $3.9 billion in 2005 to $14.6 billion in 2012, and exports of cellulose rose from $335 million to $901 million during the same time period.[106] China consumes 40 percent of world copper production, so this has implied further trade with Chile as well as direct acquisition of mines in order to cope with China's domestic demand, which has grown

in tandem with the electronics, alternative energies, and automobile industries.[107] In Peru, the expansion of the mineral extraction frontier has been particularly haphazard and frantic. Between 2002 and 2008, the area of mining concessions in Peru increased by a staggering 77.4 percent.[108] Between 2004 and 2008, the proportion of Peru's Amazon basin covered by hydrocarbon concessions went from 14 to more than 70 percent.[109]

The expansion of iron-ore mines across Latin America is also directly connected with the booming steel industry in China. Building on the computerized technologies for iron-ore smelting first pioneered by Japan, Chinese steel production increased from 40 million tons in 1980, to 489 million tons in 2007, a figure that accounted for 36 percent of world steel production. As of 2001, China had already become the world's leading steel producer, and one of the main iron-ore importers.[110] As a result, the acquisition and growth of iron-ore mines across Latin America (mainly Brazil and Peru) has also increased substantially. The mounting intensity and density of flows in the transpacific logistical corridor of mineral trade is reflected in China's agreement with Vale—Brazil's flagship mining company—to engineer and build the *Valemax*, the largest bulk carrier ship in the world. With a capacity of 450,000 deadweight tons (dwt), this mammoth vessel carries Chinese coal to Brazil and Brazilian iron ore back to China.[111]

Although these sociometabolic interdependencies hint at the fact that China could potentially fit into the category of a hegemon or ascending power, a closer look reveals a much more complex reality than a mere quest for global dominance. As opposed to Western colonial powers, Khanna argues that China is not interested in occupying territories, let alone direct political intervention.[112] Instead, it seeks to ease passage across them and steer the direction of raw material flows. As a result, Khanna asserts, the global presence of China is defined not so much by its military forces as by its supply chains. By emphasizing the transformative role of connectivity infrastructure in the everyday practice of populaces and political bodies, Khanna points toward the fact that the production of relative surplus value is a process of a higher ontological order than the political mediations of the nation-state. In an illustrative passage, Khanna asserts that "for China, supply chain blow-back *is* geopolitical blowback."[113] It is by riding the wave of material-technological expansion that China, according to Khanna, has been able to build a "global supply-chain empire" without needing the geopolitical maneuvers of old forms of imperialism.

The predominant view among scholars in the fields of international relations and Latin American studies is that China's rise as a commercial partner for Latin American economies marks a new paradigm of nonhegemonic, multipolar, "cooperative" international relations.[114] This emerging geopolitical framework, so the argument goes, contrasts starkly with the vertical and militaristic relations of the region with the American, British, Dutch, and Iberian empires. Whereas British and US relations with Latin America were interpreted as those of the enlightened master lending a charitable hand to a disciple, China is often construed as more of an ally that seeks reciprocal benefits. In terms of natural resources, China has sought diplomatic-strategic alliances with twenty-one of thirty-three Latin American nation-states; unlike the United States, it has expressed clear intentions to accept more equitable profit rates as well as to implement strict noninterference policies.[115] More than "assistance,"

commercial relations between China and Latin America have been characterized as relations of complementarity and South-South cooperation.[116]

Chinese investment strategies for primary-commodity production are also markedly different from those of other economic powers such as Canada, Britain, and the United States. Whereas China appears to be wholeheartedly interested in furthering transfers of technology and know-how in order to improve the technical conditions of extraction with the strategic partner, the US limits its participation to mere exploitation of mineral deposits or oil reserves.[117] Perhaps what is most revealing about China's bilateral relations with Latin American states is that Chinese leadership is decidedly framed in commercial rather than military terms.[118] Chinese diplomatic strategies to procure access to natural resources in Africa have been said to follow a very similar logic, because China's actors adapt to the particular histories and geographies of the African states with which they engage. Aptly termed *flexigemony* by Carmody and Taylor,[119] the incipient forms of rule and modes of natural-resource governance introduced by China mark a clear break with the neocolonial and realist orientations of Western economic powers. Whereas neoliberal "virtualism" sought to make the actuality of social relations conform to an ideal type, Chinese interests build upon the principle of peaceful rise (*heping juequi*) to dictate a rhizome-like approach that uses existing networks of influence but also creates new ones.[120]

These incipient modes of geoeconomic resource governance, however, are far from unproblematic or peaceful. In the style of the narrative twists of a Hitchcock film, where the macabre is unexpectedly superimposed on the idyllic, unsettling visions emerge as one descends from the nonhegemonic, harmonious diplomatic alliances of China to the everyday spatiotemporality of extraction mediated by them. Kidnappings and attacks against Chinese engineers and workers in the primary sector, according to Khanna,[121] are on the rise from the Niger Delta to southern Sudan. Zambian miners, he argues, "have violently rebelled against their Chinese employers' slave wages and slave-driving tactics, on several occasions trampling, crushing, and killing them deep inside mine shafts."[122] Mounting levels of police violence, state crackdowns, and even genocidal war have become part and parcel of the experiential basis of some of the expanding territories of extraction of this new geopolitical reality. The gold, gas, uranium, and oil deposits of the Baluchistan province in Pakistan, to cite an example, have led to the fierce suppression of local communities at the hands of the Pakistani army and Chinese state-owned mining companies.[123] The Baluchistan Liberation Army has retaliated by sabotaging pipelines, blowing up crowded buses, and killing numerous Chinese engineers near the infamous port of Gwadar.[124] Mines of cobalt and tantalum in the Democratic Republic of Congo, notoriously connected to the supply chains of the giant global contractors of the electronics industry—the majority of which are located in Asia—have also been at the center of international controversy due to the encroaching presence of slave labor, child soldiers, mass rape, and genocide.[125]

As Ho-fung Hung argues, gone are the days when activists attributed many of the social and political ills of the developing world to Washington or Washington-based international financial institutions.[126] To add to Hung, it is worth pointing out that activists (in Latin

America, at least) do not see China as a direct imperialist power either. The paradox of it all is that the experience of imperialist practice continues to exert a powerful imprint upon the everyday lives of the local communities that coexist with infrastructure and resource-extraction projects. A 2013 manifesto of feminist activists mobilizing against resource extraction frames this context as follows:

> We are Latin American women and our identity was forged in the resistance to the colonial conquest of our territories and the pillaging of our land's commons. After more than five centuries, we continue to face ever-renewed forms of colonialism and patriarchy, now at the hands of transnational corporations who, backed by national governments, plunder and steal our common goods, thus moving forward with the silent genocide of our people.[127]

The underlying content of global capital accumulation, therefore, often presents itself in contemporary spaces of extraction under the guise of a "banal neoimperialism."[128] A whole material culture of institutional practice and technical artifacts—objectified, for example, in police raids and harassment, security fences, trenchant pollution, swarms of security guards, pamphlets containing death threats, and judicial orders of incarceration, among many others—weaves an everyday imperial reality that reproduces the same modalities of extraeconomic force that have marked Latin American history for centuries. A 2018 report by Global Witness found that 2017 was the most dangerous year on record for defenders of the environment, as 207 indigenous, land, and environmental activists were murdered.[129]

Behind such mystified political forms is not an internally determined "hegemon" that operates in territorial space and that consciously and autonomously articulates a geopolitical project. The sheer magnitude of the means of production conjured by industrial upgrading in China and other Tigers has set into motion destructive forces that seem to lie beyond any form of collective mediation, whether from state or market. A single open-cast mine can be operated by up to a dozen companies from different countries, performing different functions with different workforces, some of which are often produced by transnational migratory flows and not even under a direct work relation but outsourced and subcontracted. As we will see in the following chapter, open-cast mining has become so capital-intensive, as well as racialized and gendered, that new and variegated actors have been drawn into geographies of extraction, typically operating alongside mining corporations in ways that hamper transparency and accountability. When a mine is directly operated by a Chinese corporation (state-owned or otherwise), the complex and pervasive socioecological effects are no different from properties controlled by Western companies notorious for human rights abuses and socioecological degradation.[130] What is distressing about the forces of destruction being unleashed is that rarely can a single actor, political or economic, be held accountable for them.

The "empire of muddle," which Lewis Mumford described in making sense of the disintegrating forces brought about by the mechanization of resource extraction during the first industrial revolution,[131] seems to have become much more advanced and systematic in the present industrial age—the era that Klaus Schwab and others paradoxically celebrate as the pinnacle of human progress. As Marx and Engels prophetically admonished in the *Communist Manifesto*, modern bourgeois society resembles "the sorcerer, who is no longer

able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells."[132] Spatial technologies of extraction are traversed by violence, dispossession, and ecological destruction. Its prime mover, however, is not an autonomous imperial power but the abstract, directionally purposed forms of social mediation that assert and reassert capital as the alienated subject of modern life. In an interview, a planning official of a mining town in Chile remarked that poisoned rivers, encroaching local unemployment, air pollution, and cancer epidemics are clearly connected to mining and energy megaprojects, but accountability becomes elusive when layers upon layers of contractors, companies, outsourced workers, and subsidiaries operate simultaneously. He juxtaposed this with state-developmentalist regimes of resource extraction of previous decades, where there was far less complexity in the technical division of labor and the mining company became directly embedded in the life of the community.[133]

In this sense, perhaps nothing reflects more clearly the actual processes at work in the geographies of large-scale mining than what Pádraig Carmody has labeled "the new scramble for Africa."[134] Against ideological visions that posit external neocolonial penetration into the continent to reap its natural resources, Carmody illustrates how numerous alliances between the BRICS and BRICS-based companies have developed coordinated modes of engagement with African countries that do not resemble traditional core-periphery models. The most important C in the BRICS, according to Carmody, may not be China but capitalism.[135] The big C in the BRICS, Carmody concludes, is global and operates according to its own laws, which are personified by a very wide array of actors and institutions.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the coming of age of the planetary mine brings with it the pressing need to conceptualize capitalist society as an organic whole, not as an aggregation of national economies. The industrialization of the global South, coupled with the technological and industrial upgrading taking place across East Asia, requires a conceptual apparatus that can capture the transformation of capitalism into a genuinely global—not merely Western—form of social mediation. Accounts that seek to understand spaces of extraction *exclusively* in terms of the international political relations of the nation-state (in the guise of dependency, unequal exchange, core-periphery dynamics, and so forth), I have argued, confuse the essence of global capitalism with its multiple, historical, and phenomenal appearances. By pointing to the need to consider the political mediations of the nation-state as the modes of existence of a prior reality—i.e., the production of the total surplus value of society—this chapter has provided some methodological elements for taking seriously the differentiated, yet unitary nature of politics and economics. Processing social relations into particularized political categories is a constant struggle to suppress the expression of class experience and to transform class relations into nonclass forms.[136]

Although this discussion may appear somewhat esoteric and abstract, it has definitive political implications. Reducing natural-resource governance to a political interaction

between “cores” and “peripheries” embodied in abstractly constituted nation-states is tantamount to accepting the fetishization of class struggle into distinct political and economic channels. Most importantly, it leads to the sort of reformist view where it would be considered possible to transform society by the mere conquest of political institutions. The case of the postneoliberal governments of Latin America’s “Pink Tide” illustrates that claims to “national liberation” are severely limited without a more comprehensive project to supersede the modern forms of labor that act as the foundation of the political apparatus. Numerous studies have demonstrated that despite their intention to overturn the hierarchical relations of the interstate system by political means, postneoliberal governments in Latin America became even more dependent on primary-commodity exports and more aggressively subsumed in the cyclical compulsions of the world market.[137] To reiterate, this does not mean that the left should abandon anti-imperialism as a political idiom. Anti-imperialist struggle can fulfill (and very often does fulfill) an important political role, but when strategically mobilized as an entry point to more directly challenge the historical thrust of class domination.

Also, the concept of the fourth machine age developed in this chapter warrants a caveat. As Bonefeld et al., rightly stress, periodizations are to be approached with caution.[138] Dividing the history of the modern mode of production into periods can be insightful only insofar as this allows us to better understand the continuity of the movement of contradiction constituted by the reproduction of class relations. For this reason, more than an issue of semantics and of fetishizing “newness,” framing our technological present in terms of a *fourth machine age* should serve as a heuristic to ask the really important questions: What does the current overhaul in the sociotechnical basis of large-scale industry reveal about the nature of state power, of capital accumulation, and of the class agencies that animate modern society? Most importantly, framing our present era in terms of a fourth machine age, in my view, should also be considered a political *dispositif* or critical idiom that departs from the liberal boosterism and circulationism of the mainstream literature, which tends to be unaware of the crisis tendencies intrinsic to late capitalist technology. Pundits tend to present this “fourth industrial revolution” in terms of a horizon of possibility or peril, as if its effects were yet to materialize in some unspecified future. One only needs to scratch the surface to find out that the alleged future horizons of the fourth industrial revolution are already at work in the dark undersides of contemporary industrial capitalism.

Finally, this chapter has also demonstrated that an approach that makes analytical distinctions between the essential movement of value and its sensuous political manifestations is also particularly useful in making sense of the pervasive presence of imperialist practice amid an alleged postcolonial international context. Despite the new frameworks of cooperative and nonhegemonic resource diplomacy characteristic of the new international division of labor, indigenous peoples, women, peasants, and other subaltern groups across Latin America (and beyond) continue to experience the same logics of racialized violence, patriarchal domination, and militarization that distinguished the Western powers’ strategies for securing access to raw materials. These forms of imperialist and subimperialist practice, I have argued, need to be understood as a fetishized expression of a deeper underlying content. Perhaps *the* most salient contribution of Marx’s critique of

political economy consisted in "the treatment of surplus-value independently of its particular forms as profit, interest, rent, etc."[139] Classical political economists, in Marx's view, failed to get at the taproot of this problem; their analyses remained tethered to the phenomenal expressions of surplus value in the distorted forms of profit and rent.[140] Imperialism should therefore be understood as the experiential basis that underpins the subsumption of the constitutive outside of capital to the process of accumulation. If, as Stuart Hall once argued, race is the modality in which class is lived,[141] then imperialism should be understood as the corporeal phenomenology of a process whose essential content is to be found in the *telos* of the value form: the production of the free market through the exploitation of the laboring class as a pulsing, breathing, planetary organism. The next chapter is devoted to understanding this latter, living moment within the metabolism of extraction.