



Criticism of the “imperialist pyramid” scheme

I. Premise

The inter-imperialist war which is being waged on the backs of the proletariat and peoples of Ukraine and Russia has brought to light opposing and irreconcilable conceptions of imperialism expressed by organized forces (parties or groups) which have the communism as a reference point.

Imperialism is an essential question of Marxist-Leninist theory. The entire economic and political history, the phenomena of current social life, the facts relating to capitalism, the opportunism in the workers' movement, the tendency towards political reaction and war, as well as the need for the socialist revolution of the proletariat, are understandable only in the light of this theory, which guides revolutionary action.

It is not possible to offer a historical and political assessment of the current war, as well as the determination of its nature, which fits fully into the struggle between the great powers for a new division of the world, areas of influence, raw materials, etc., if one does not explain, in the most complete way, from the economic and the political side, the nature of imperialism as the highest and last stage of development of capitalism.

In recent years, positions of a revisionist, reformist and opportunist nature have openly emerged which separate or confuse aggressive political tendencies, military interventions, etc., with the economic essence of imperialism.

These are re-editions of the Kautskyan conception, which denies that imperialism is the highest and last stage of development of capitalism, arguing instead that it is a preferred policy of finance capital. This concept serves to demonstrate that the imperialists can carry out another policy, a non-imperialist policy, one without conquest, or plundering. The consequence of this are the calls in favor of "multipolarity" and "multilateralism", a mask behind which are hidden the interests of imperialist and capitalist states, especially China, which are challenging US world hegemony.

Against these positions, the KKE (Communist Party of Greece), and in our country some communist formations that in one way or another share its positions, have advanced a sharp criticism supporting a vision of the imperialist system centered on the scheme of a "pyramid".

We welcome the criticism of neo-Kautskyan reformism and opportunism, we welcome the denunciation and condemnation of the forces that deny the definition of imperialism given by Lenin, that support the “multipolarism” and rely on one imperialism to fight another. May there be the clearest separation from these forces!

We welcome these developments, but we ask: is it correct to interpret the imperialist system as a pyramid scheme? Is it a real contribution that allow us to understand the fundamental aspects of the imperialist system and its internal contradictions? What consequences follow from this scheme?

II. The pyramid scheme

Let us start with this explanation of the pyramid scheme to get to the heart of the issue.

“They [the opportunists, Editor's note] arbitrarily use the assessment of Lenin in his well-known work Imperialism, The Highest Stage of Capitalism that a handful, a very small number of states are plundering the vast majority of the states across the globe. As a consequence imperialism is identified with a very small number of countries, which can be counted on the fingers of one hand, while all the others are subordinate, oppressed, colonies, occupied due to their subservience to the liberal viewpoint.

Today, there are few countries which are at the top, in the highest positions of the international imperialist system (which is also illustrated by a pyramid scheme in order to show the various levels that the capitalist countries occupied). One could say that at the top there are a handful of countries, to use the Leninist expression. But this does not mean that all the other capitalist countries are victims of the powerful capitalist states, that the bourgeoisie of most countries has submitted to the pressure, despite their general interest that it [the bourgeoisie, Editor's note] has been corrupted. It does not mean that the struggle of the peoples must be directed against Germany in Europe while in the American continent it must be directed merely against the US.” (Article by A. Papariga, former secretary of the KKE, for “El Machete”, journal of the Communist Party of Mexico, 2013.)

The KKE represents the world imperialist system as a pyramid, at the top of which are placed the most mature and powerful capitalist states, and at its lower levels, down to the base, are the other countries, including those of the peripheral "south" of the world. For example, the EU countries are included in this pyramid, including Greece itself which would occupy an intermediate position in the world imperialist system.

The "imperialist pyramid" has its own internal hierarchy, a network of asymmetrical interdependencies determined by the economic, political and military strength of the states, and sees positional changes (upward or downward) caused by the law of unequal development and by the change of the power relations between the elements of the pyramid, both above and below.

Let's continue with the statements of the supporters of the pyramid construction:

“The number of states that are regional powers, satellites of strong imperialist powers, countries that play a particular role in the politics of alliances and political affiliation with one or another power of the pyramid is increasing. Inter-imperialist contradictions are at work in every form of alliance and all these multifaceted relations, which concern all the capitalist countries of the world without exception, constitute the imperialist pyramid.

(...) Lenin, as is well known, used the "chain" scheme. The diagram, which we use on every occasion, is a way of helping the workers to understand the reality of imperialism as monopoly capitalism, as rotten and dying capitalism, in which all the capitalist countries are incorporated, according to their strength (economic, political, military etc.).” (KKE's Leninist Approach to Imperialism and the Imperialist Pyramid, 2015).

The pyramid shape is described by the different forms of relations existing between these capitalist countries, as well as by their alliances and internal disputes.

By adopting the pyramid scheme, priority is given to the existing relations between imperialist and capitalist countries rather than to the economic nature and characteristics of the specific countries. In other words, a structuralist vision of imperialism, formalist and mechanical, is adopted, which is in contrast with the vision based on a concrete analysis of reality and a study of its intimate contradictions, employing the Marxist dialectic.

Assuming the pyramid scheme, the KKE and other militant forces do not escape the difficulties that this conception raises. Indeed, what does it mean to say that all the countries in which the capitalist mode of production dominates are included into the imperialist pyramid?

The supporters of the imperialist pyramid scheme vehemently reject any relation with Kautsky's theory of ultra-imperialism and claim to take Leninist positions, but this alleged rebuilding of financial monopoly capitalism looks a lot like the old Kautskyan formula of the international unification of national imperialisms.

In reality, the pyramid thesis is in contrast with the Leninist theory of imperialism, since it includes all capitalist countries, even the dependent and backward ones, in the pyramid according to a rank that depends on the economic and state strength of each country. There would be differences of degree, but not of quality.

In essence, since capitalism entered the phase of imperialism over a century ago, today there would no longer exist any non-imperialist countries on the face of the earth since the five main "*purely economic fundamental concepts*" identified by Lenin for a definition of imperialism would apply to all existing countries.

This abstract judgment is reiterated by the KKE on other occasions:

"These characteristics do not only concern the states at the top of the imperialist pyramid, but they are uniform; they concern all states, more or less strong, because the monopolistic and reactionary epoch of capitalism is uniform". (G. Marinou, speech given at the 22nd ICWPO in Cuba, 2022).

Behind this pretense of uniformity, the KKE and the other political formations that adopt the pyramid scheme end up replacing the Marxist-Leninist method of analysis and the precise, timely and rigorous evaluation of the profound contradictions and antagonisms of imperialism with a vague and unclear formula, a bookish description of finance monopoly capitalism which eludes all the problems that the current epoch poses to the communists.

III. A distorted view of reality

The age we live in is that of imperialism and revolution, that is, of the domination of monopoly finance capital, the last stage of capitalism, its last historical form, which is followed by the revolutionary triumph of the working class and socialism. It is an era that embraces a complex of contradictory phenomena, typical and non-typical, small and large, distinctive of developed and backward countries.

We speak of a world imperialist system because capitalism has long since transformed itself into a world system of exploitation, oppression and financial strangulation of the vast majority of the world's population by "*a handful of advanced countries*" (Lenin, Preface to Imperialism). The bourgeoisie has carried out the division of the world for over a century, it has penetrated into all countries to exploit the labour-power and to export capital and goods, it has secured foreign markets, areas of influence and for investment of the capital, it plunders the sources of raw materials.

Imperialism has developed the productive forces and transformed the world in its image and likeness; it has dragged all countries, all peoples along the path of finance-capitalist exploitation; it squeezes surplus value from hundreds of millions of workers, accumulating enormous wealth.

The financial oligarchy exerts its power on enormous masses of laborers of all countries, from the metropolis to the most remote corners of the globe, chaining individual countries and individual national economies to the shackles of finance capital, exploitation and of oppression exercised by a minority of countries with a high level of capitalist development.

Undoubtedly the world has changed and three-quarters of the existing countries are no longer colonial, as they were in Lenin's time. Undeniably the number of imperialist countries has increased since the beginning of the 20th century. Capitalism is in a state of permanent movement and uneven development, consequentially there is not a list of imperialist power defined once and for all. But the possibility that a capitalist country becoming imperialist is not yet a reality.

The development of the world economy during the period of capitalist "globalization" has resulted that same "emerging countries", like China, Brazil, Turkey, India, Indonesia, South Africa, etc. came in a position to accumulate capital and export it, thanks to the high rate of exploitation of work-force. This process was not so big as the monopolies of the imperialist countries, but it was not modest for their condition. During this period, China developed into an imperialist state while the capitalists of this and other countries came in an advantageous position and increased their share in some sector of world market (raw materials, manufacture, agriculture, etc.)

This developments and other factors, lead to the vision that is presumably the situation is not what it used to be (that a handful of imperialists rule the rest of the world), but that we have a new situation with new regional powers, etc. The supporters of the pyramid scheme try to interpret this new circumstance. But they fail for different reasons, as we'll see.

To understand the reality of imperialism, we have to distinguish between imperialist countries and dependent, colonial and semi-colonial countries, economically, technologically and financially dominated and *de facto* subjected to the former, without hiding this fundamental contrast behind the misleading consideration that the characteristics of the imperialist system no longer allow us to determine the actual nature of the different countries.

The multiform relationships among states cannot be confused with the different economic nature of these states. There are still the dominant imperialist countries and the dependent capitalist countries, as well as the semi-colonial and colonial ones (the latter are few, but they too still exist), subject to imperialism.

From the exploitation and subjugation of the backward capitalist countries within the system of oppression and financial strangulation, it does not follow that they have all become imperialist (or sub-imperialist) countries, as they have forms and varieties of relations or alliances with the imperialist powers. In reality, are precisely these relations that amplify and strengthen their condition of dependency and backwardness.

Let's ask: to which countries do the existing monopolies belong? If one scrolls through one of the studies in circulation which fixes the largest international monopolies at a certain number, one observes that they belong to about twenty old and new imperialist and capitalist powers (USA, China, Japan, Germany, France, United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Russia, Netherlands, South Korea, Switzerland, Canada, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Finland, Spain, Norway, Australia).

Which countries benefit the majority of monopoly profits? Basically, the same group of countries.

In how many countries is financial capital concentrated? In a handful of countries where there are the financial citadels of the world (New York, Shanghai, London, Miami, Taipei, Hong Kong, Singapore, Monaco, Zurich, Tokyo, Sidney, Paris, Frankfurt, Milan).

How many countries are financially dependent on the imperialist powers? Many of them.

How many are usurious states? A limited number. How many debtor states are there? A large number.

Which countries are leading the struggle for a new division of the world? They are the great imperialist powers (USA, China, Russia, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Canada, Japan....) with their international alliances.

The reality of imperialism today confirms the Leninist analysis, disavowing the "pan-imperialism" and mystification of "mutual dependency" advocated by the proponents of the pyramid scheme.

One of the fundamental presuppositions of the imperialist pyramid scheme is the absolutization of one of the characteristics of imperialism, namely the formation of monopolies and the constitution of finance capital. It is a main hallmark of imperialism, but it is not the only one and must be understood taking into account its determining function both at the national level and in "*all economic and international relations*" (Lenin, Imperialism). Equally important are the export of capital, the division of the world among the great powers, etc.

It is necessary to analyze in a multilateral and comprehensive way the aspects and characteristics of imperialism, their quality, their proportions, their connections, their dynamics, the concrete forms of the monopoly stage of capitalism, without falling into unilateral and sophistical approaches which embrace only a side of the phenomenon.

The replacement of the concrete analysis with the abstractness of the pyramid scheme leads to erroneous conclusions. For example, if in some countries subjected to imperialism there are capitalists who make some investments abroad, or are owners of businesses outside the borders, this does not mean that they too are imperialists, and no longer dependent, subjected to the international division of labour, with a growing presence of foreign capital, etc.

At the same time, the presence of transnational monopolies in the dependent countries does not indicate a qualitative leap in their economic base, but must be understood as a product of the capital export of the imperialist countries in sectors where profits can be maximized, raw materials plundered, etc. This does not change, but aggravates the condition of dependence and backwardness of those countries, damages other sectors such as agriculture, causes environmental disasters, reactionary violence, etc.

The development of the productive forces and the process of internationalization of the world economy favor these phenomena, without changing the relationships of dependence and oppression. We must not confuse general tendencies with concreteness.

Even formally independent capitalist countries are dominated by imperialism and thus made dependent. Economic dependence is in fact fully achievable with the political independence of the different capitalist states; without doubts this occurs and is continuously strengthened.

The transformations and modernization of the capitalism of some so-called “developing” countries, even the participation of these countries with troops in military aggression or the adoption of imperialist policies (such as those of the IMF), does not mean that these countries are no longer subjugated to imperialism, that they are no longer exploited by international monopolies, by international financial institutions headed by a small number of imperialist powers.

As we have mentioned, the imperialist world system is a system of financial enslavement and oppression of peoples and most countries by a group of dominant powers. In the pyramid scheme instead all the countries of the world make up a single group that includes both the imperialist countries as the dependent, oppressed ones. This highlights the lack of dialectic, as viewing the world through the lens of this hierarchical scheme leads to the denial of the qualitative difference of phenomena (e.g., from the development of capitalism to imperialism), assuming that there is only a quantitative difference between the countries that make up the pyramid with distinctions in their power relations. This consideration prevents the qualitative differences from being recognized. Therefore, it becomes easy to lump everything together.

In other words, the supporters of the pyramid scheme confuse the character of the era with all the phenomena it embraces, which have instead different natures from country to country (imperialist and dependent countries, oppressors and oppressed, plunderers and plundered).

The world imperialist system, the single imperialist chain that strangles the proletarians and the peoples, has nothing to do with the pyramid scheme in which both the imperialist countries and the dependent, semi-colonial and colonial countries are included. This scheme replaces the different phase of development of these countries, i.e. the change of some fundamental qualities of capitalism into their opposite, with the ranking inherent the pyramid metaphor.

Marxism-Leninism does not put all the imperialist and capitalist countries, dominant and dependent, into the same bag, but distinguishes the imperialist, oppressive, exploiting countries from the oppressed, dependent countries and nations, exposing the bourgeois and petty bourgeois lies that try to hide the financial, political and military enslavement of the vast majority of the world's population by a minority formed by the most advanced, richest and most powerful capitalist countries. Otherwise, behind the formulas to effect, end up affirming generalizations detached from reality and the concept of "pure imperialism", which Lenin fought resolutely.

IV. The consequences of the pyramid scheme

What are the theoretical and political, strategic and tactical consequences of adopting the imperialist pyramid scheme?

In the first place, with the "imperialist pyramid" scheme one of the main contradictions of our era is neglected and even ignored: the contradiction between imperialism and the peoples of the dependent, colonial and semi-colonial countries of the world, which is deepening due to the plunder, exploitation and oppression, intervention and interference exercised by the monopolies and imperialist states.

Proponents of the pyramid scheme conceal the existence and development of this contradiction, dissolving it within the one between the different imperialist powers.

But imperialism – together with the sharpening of the contradictions between imperialist powers and financial groups which today is expressed at the highest level in the all-out struggle for hegemony between the USA and China (that it's not simply a fight for first and second place at the top of the pyramid) does not suppress the irreconcilable antagonism between imperialist and the peoples of dependent countries; on the contrary, it sharpens it in the current situation.

The objective contradiction between the policy of robbery and oppression of world imperialism and an independent development of these countries persists and worsens even where the national bourgeoisie, in addition to the *compradora* bourgeoisie, adapts itself to relations with imperialism (often trying to renegotiate their dependence on the main world brigands).

In these countries the interests of the national capital, which is intertwined with international capital, and the people and the working class are very different and opposing. While the first benefit from the imperialist plunder and are even accomplices (it is a fact that today no significant large capital group in these countries can operate internationally without interdependence with imperialist finance capital), the last are the victims.

This contradiction can only be overcome by the revolutionary struggle of the working masses of the dependent, semi-colonial and colonial countries.

Secondly, supporting the pyramid scheme and skipping qualitative differences ends up denying the international magnitude of the struggle that develops in the dependent, semi-colonial and colonial countries, which is an inextinguishable and dynamic outbreak of the revolutionary mass movement.

The contrasts between the imperialist world and the dependent, semi-colonial and colonial countries do not diminish, but are accentuated and often lead to open conflicts that assume an acute character: popular uprisings that take place on the basis of the anti-imperialist struggle and the struggle against the exploiting bourgeoisie (in Latin America, Africa, Asia, etc.). The fundamental issues that led to large mass protests are unresolved in these countries, so the struggle movement is at a developmental stage in many dependent countries.

These circumstances are extremely important for the proletariat, because they deeply undermine the positions of monopoly capitalism, and strategically transform the dependent countries from reserves of imperialism into reserves of the proletarian revolution. Consequently, Marxist-Leninists stand firmly on the side of oppressed peoples and nations and support their national and social liberation movements.

The formation of a front of struggle between the forces of the proletariat of the imperialist countries and the working masses of these countries is of decisive importance in the present era. Outside this alliance led by the proletariat there is no possibility of victory against the organized forces of finance capital.

Thirdly, supporting the imperialist pyramid thesis advocates a direct transition to socialism for all countries, including dependent, semi-colonial and colonial ones.

For the supporters of the imperialist pyramid scheme, the era of democratic and popular revolutions is over because in the era of imperialism and proletarian revolution the problem of the direct transition to socialism concerns all countries where there is the presence of monopoly capitalism. Since finance capital is also present in dependent, semi-colonial and colonial countries (if only for the looting that it carries out there), the direct transition to socialism is theorized for these countries as well, without going through any transitory stage.

This thesis is based on the fact that the strategy and tactics of the communist parties are determined exclusively by the "epoch" in which capital and the proletariat live and fight against each other. It is precisely an error like this that Lenin thoroughly criticized in some polemical writings against Piatakov, who maintained that it was wrong to fight for the defense of democracy against reaction, for the self-determination of nations, etc., because by now we were living in another historical era, the "era of imperialism". Lenin unmasked the tendency towards "imperialist economism" of Bukharin, Piatakov and Bosc which denied the possibility of carrying on the struggle for national and democratic rights in the imperialist era.

In the shadow of the "pyramid" emerges the renunciation of the hegemonic function of the proletariat on an international scale, the ideological and political incapacity to use the struggle for reforms by subordinating it to the struggle for revolution, to link the struggle for the socialist revolution to democratic and anti-imperialist tasks in a number of dependent countries.

The imperialist pyramid scheme contradicts the need for revolutionary strategy and tactics based on the level of development of each country and the objective revolutionary tasks facing the communists, including the creation of class alliances and popular fronts led by the working class.

It underestimates the importance of the revolutionary democratic tasks, the importance of the national, anti-imperialist and anti-fascist struggle in the revolutionary development of many peoples (for example, in the African countries which are pregnant with democratic and anti-imperialist revolutions).

With the thesis of the direct transition to socialism for all countries – a direct consequence of the adoption of the pyramid scheme – revisionist positions are not fought, but erroneous or unfounded tasks and strategies are envisaged for the dependent, semi-colonial and colonial countries.

The democratic, national liberation and anti-imperialist tasks are separated from the socialist ones, with serious consequences for the revolutionary processes of the countries which have to go through preparatory stages, more or less rapid, to reach the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The people's democratic revolution is the stage to get through for numerous dependent, semi-colonial and colonial countries. The national question and the democratic revolution must not inevitably be led and resolved by the national bourgeoisie. They can be led and brought to success by the proletariat at the head of its allies, without the fundamental forces of the bourgeoisie, and without the latter having a leading role.

In the epoch of imperialism there is no insurmountable barrier between the democratic revolution and the proletarian revolution, but the former can and must transform itself into the latter; it is used for the transition to the second phase.

If on the one hand, the relationship between socialism, democracy and the national question is crushed under the weight of the pyramid, on the other hand it has harmful consequences to the living practice of proletarian internationalism.

It must be remembered that the proletarians of the imperialist countries and those of the dependent countries do not raise identical demands and slogans, even though they have the same general objectives and the same final goal. The pyramid thesis insinuates the idea of the impossibility of national liberation struggles, of democratic and revolutionary wars, of the democratic tasks of revolutions in exploited and oppressed countries, of the struggle for self-determination and national

rights, for the emancipation of peoples. And with this approach, internationalist support for these processes is also weakening.

But there is another big question. If the pyramid thesis were right, and imperialism has turned in a single solid block, how could a single country (or a few countries) be detached from it? Where the world imperialistic front could be broken if there are no weakest points in Leninist sense, but only "more or less strong states" with "uniform characteristics" and substantial interdependence among them? Would a single, simultaneous world revolutionary act be necessary as form for the transition from capitalism to socialism?

It is no coincidence that Lenin does not use the metaphor of the pyramid, but imperialist chain. This image highlights the non-monolithic and unbreakable nature of the imperialist system, but subject to rupture at one or more points.

We have to be very careful about the re-proposition in different forms, with new terminologies and images, of old theses that manifest the inability to understand the international proletarian revolution as a result of processes of a different nature and not contemporary, that denies the possibility of the revolutionary breaking of the imperialist chain in one or more points, usually the weakest in a chain under tension, and of the construction of socialism in one or more countries, albeit less developed ones and those surrounded by imperialism.

V. In conclusion....

As we have seen, the pyramid scheme, despite being presented as a modern illustration of the imperialism, goes in contradiction in several aspects with Marxism-Leninism and leads to wrong ideological and political consequences.

The fundamental theses of the Leninist theory of imperialism and proletarian revolution are deformed and denied by the pyramid description and its consequences. It is an anti-dialectical scheme that does not help communists understand and fight imperialism, putrid and dying capitalism. It is the wrong cure for a really existing opportunist and reformist disease, a medicine that has several contraindications, even fatal ones, as we have demonstrated.

We must fight against the denial and caricatures of Leninism, against its reduction to a few quotations or references without connection to the whole theory, strategy and tactics of the movement for the emancipation of the proletariat. At the same time, we must criticize and demolish all the clichés that are repeated uncritically, as well as the insertion of foreign bodies into Marxism-Leninism, due to the lack of ideological training and the lack of assimilation of materialist dialectics.

The international communist movement is struggling to find its revolutionary unity. The heavy legacy of revisionism which led to the defeat of the first experiences of proletarian socialism still weighs heavily on our movement, while old and new opportunist and social-democrat deviations appear and become more acute in this period marked by the imperialist war being fought in Ukraine.

The revival of our movement can only take place following a close theoretical, ideological and political struggle against all these deformations and deviations, based on the defense of Marxist-Leninist principles applied to concrete reality.

It is not possible that on a fundamental issue such as that of imperialism, disinterest is shown, or an "intermediate line" is adopted; rather it is time to insist on the obligation to study in depth and definitively clarify the problems raised, sweeping away the confusion existing in the communist and workers' movement.

The critique of the "imperialist pyramid" scheme is not an academic one but it is necessary because it has profound effects on the analysis, strategy and tactics of the communists in the different countries and internationally.

The communists who are fighting to give to the working class their own independent and revolutionary party, to strengthen international cooperation of communist parties and organization on solid Marxist-Leninist foundations, cannot evade the task of achieving the most complete clarity on the question of imperialism and on the closely related question of opportunism.

We therefore invite the development of ideological and political debate and confrontation, in the spirit of the struggle for the unity of the communists (Marxist-Leninists).

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