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‘The 20th century ended imperialism as a viable practice’. Discuss.

The proposition that the twentieth century "ended imperialism as a viable practice" is persuasive only if imperialism is narrowly equated with formal territorial rule. In that sense, the century did transform world politics: European empires collapsed, anti-colonial nationalism became one of the defining forces of the age, and the rhetoric of self-determination made the acquisition of territory increasingly illegitimate. Yet this definition risks mistaking the death of empire for the death of imperial power itself. Drawing on Kwame Nkrumah's theory of neo-colonialism (Nkrumah, 1965), imperialism should be best understood as the attempt by powerful states to organise the political, economic and cultural life of weaker societies in their own interests. Hence, the twentieth century did not end imperialism as a "viable practice" but transformed imperialism from the increasingly unsustainable nature of formal conquest to informal systems of state power, operating within the moral and legal frameworks of sovereignty. Thus, whilst the century undermined the viability of formal colonial rule, it enabled imperialism to survive as the subordination of weaker states with nominal sovereignty through neo-colonial structures.

Rather than ending imperialism, decolonisation in the twentieth century restructured it as more viable through neo-colonial economic dependency. Caribbean states gained formal sovereignty, yet remained dependent on external capital, Western consumer demand and international financial institutions. Although tourism has brought clear benefits for the Caribbean, contributing to over 22% of GDP and supporting 2.75 million jobs (World Bank, 2025), the region has retained patterns that remain reminiscent of its colonial past. Under formal colonialism, Caribbean economies were organised around plantation production for external markets, with land and labour directed towards the enrichment of European metropolitan powers. Tourism does not replicate colonialism directly but reproduces this extractive outward-facing economic dynamic; beaches, infrastructure, labour and culture are shaped around the consumption of wealthier foreign visitors, investors and corporations.

Dependency Theory associated with Raul Prebisch and Andre Gunder Frank (Prebisch, 1950; Frank, 1967), explains why this phenomenon matters. It argues the world economy is stratified into a wealthy, powerful "core" and a poorer, resource-dependent "periphery", where underdevelopment is not simply caused by domestic mismanagement but by a global economic structure designed to siphon surplus value to enrich the "core" economies. Underdevelopment is not a natural, transitory stage in a linear process of economic growth, it is a framework of economic neo-colonialism, subsequently limiting the agency of sovereign nations to achieve long-term economic growth through conventional free-market participation. Applied to the Caribbean, historical patterns of colonisation have created dependency relations that perpetuate economic neo-colonialism. The apparent profitability of tourism is masked by its neo-colonial character: approximately 80% of tourism-related spending is withdrawn to overseas firms (United Nations Atlas of the Oceans, n.d.). The tourism sector operates less as a route to autonomous development but rather as a mechanism

through which foreign-owned corporations extract value from local land, labour and culture. This substantially limits domestic wealth, as profits are frequently repatriated abroad while domestic workers are left with comparatively low wages and restricted opportunities for wider economic development.

As a result, this dependency was starkly exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, when travel restrictions caused a near-total collapse of Caribbean tourism, with tourist arrivals to the Caribbean falling by 65.5% in 2020 (Caribbean Tourism Organisation, 2021). The sudden shock of COVID-19, which induced a 9.1% GDP contraction (United Nations Sustainable Development Group, 2020), exposed the fragility and limited diversification of Caribbean economies; traits historically linked to colonial economic structuring. Under colonial rule, Caribbean societies were integrated into the global economy as specialised, outward-facing economies rather than develop autonomously. Local economies, like the Caribbean nations remain subordinate, unable to leverage self-sufficient development strategies to buffer against global disruptions. Admittedly, Caribbean tourism cannot be dismissed as purely exploitative: it provides employment, foreign exchange, and infrastructure investment – a route to growth actively pursued by Caribbean governments. Nonetheless, this does not undermine the neo-colonial argument; rather, it reveals the constrained nature of postcolonial agency. Economies of "periphery" countries, like the Caribbean often operate within a global economy already shaped by the priorities of wealthier consumers, foreign investors, and international leaders. Thus, the Caribbean case is pivotal in showing that the twentieth century did not end imperialism as a viable practice; it transformed imperialism from direct colonial rule into economic structures that left formally sovereign states dependent on external markets and capital.

Although the twentieth century witnessed the rapid dismantling of formal colonial empires, it did not render imperialism obsolete. Rather, imperial influence also increasingly operated through military intervention and political manipulation, allowing powerful states to shape the domestic affairs of newly independent nations without assuming the legal and financial burdens of colonial rule. The Congo Crisis illustrates this transformation with striking clarity, where the transition from formal empire to nominal sovereignty was structurally managed to preserve metropolitan extractive hegemony. Following independence from Belgium on 30 June 1960, the Congolese state, led by Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, sought to assert control over a territory whose mineral wealth made it strategically indispensable (U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, n.d.). The secession of the Katanga province in July 1960 (Young, 1965) was therefore not merely a domestic constitutional crisis, but an economic rupture that exposed how territorial integrity could be subordinated to resource extraction. Crucially, Katanga generated roughly half of the Congo's national revenue, its secession proved economically devastating for the central government (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and International Development Association, 1964). In this sense, decolonisation produced sovereignty without secure control over the material foundations of the state.

This economic fragmentation was reinforced through a coordinated military and diplomatic intervention, transforming a struggle over resource sovereignty into a theatre of proxy

warfare. Belgian military intervention and foreign mercenaries constrained Congolese self-determination under the geopolitical logic of Cold War containment. The later Western backing of Mobutu, who removed Lumumba from power in September 1960 (U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, n.d.) and expelled Soviet advisers, further demonstrated how external powers sought not to recolonise Congo formally, but to secure a politically compliant state aligned with Western strategic interests. This pattern closely reflects Kwame Nkrumah's conception of neo-colonialism; writing in *Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, Nkrumah argued that direct administration had become politically untenable, leading imperial powers instead to rely upon military aid, advisers, and strategically aligned governments to secure influence. His claim that military assistance represented the "last stage of neo-colonialism" is borne out by developments in Congo, where Western support for compliant political and military elites achieved many of the strategic objectives that formal empire had previously secured. Military intervention therefore functioned less as an exceptional response to instability than as a structural instrument through which geopolitical dominance could be maintained under the guise of sovereign independence.

Yet the Congo also exposes the limits of interpreting all Cold War intervention as straightforward imperialism. American policy was undeniably motivated by fear of Soviet expansion, while the intervention of the United Nations reflected an emerging international commitment to preserving the sovereignty of newly independent states. Such considerations complicate any simplistic equation between Cold War rivalry and imperial ambition. Nevertheless, these distinctions ultimately reinforce rather than undermine the broader argument. Regardless of the ideological justification, external powers repeatedly determined the political trajectory of formally independent states, limiting the substantive autonomy that decolonisation purported to establish. The Congo therefore suggests that the twentieth century did not end imperialism as a viable practice; instead, it reshaped imperialism into a system of indirect political and military domination that proved more flexible, less costly, and, in many respects, more sustainable than formal colonial rule.

Although formal empire largely disappeared during the twentieth century, imperialism remained a viable practice through the international financial institutions that constrained the economic sovereignty of formally independent states. Ghana's experience of Structural Adjustment in the 1980s illustrates this shift. Facing severe economic decline, inflation of over 100% and balance of payments instability, Ghana accepted IMF and World Bank programmed that required trade liberalisation, currency devaluation, privatisation, and reductions in state expenditure (IMF, n.d.). The 1983 Economic Recovery Programme aimed to restore growth through market-led reform, yet it also reduced Ghanaian state's ability to direct development on its own terms. Although these reforms were framed as neutral economic correction, they significantly restricted Ghana's ability to pursue an independent development strategy, as a sovereign state. The social effects were considerable: between 41,000 and 45,000 civil servants were "redeployed", while structural adjustment policies also contributed to the introduction of "cash-and-carry" user fees in healthcare, reducing access for poorer groups (Hilson and Potter, 2005; Abukari, 2015). Ghana retained independence in

law, but its economic recovery became conditional upon accepting a development model designed and monitored by creditors. This transition represents a critical shift where direct colonial administration was replaced by manufactured financial imperatives, effectively de-politicising creditor-driven agendas by presenting them as neutral, unavoidable pathways to economic survival.

This can be understood through Susan Strange's concept of "structural power", which argues that power lies not only in direct coercion but in the ability to shape the structures within which states make decisions (Strange, 1988). Applied to Ghana, the IMF and World Bank did not need to govern directly because they controlled the financial conditions under which recovery became possible. This makes institutional neo-colonialism more subtle than formal empire. It does not need to abolish sovereignty but hollows it out by making certain policies appear economically unavoidable. Structural Adjustment therefore made imperialism more viable precisely because it disguised political power as technical expertise, transforming ideological commitments to free market capitalism into the language of economic necessity. Furthermore, these reforms illustrate how macroeconomic crises are systemically leveraged into instruments of political conditionality. Domestically, while fiscal volatility and balance-of-payments distress hollowed out local state capacity, they simultaneously provided the entry point for external financial institutions to redraw the parameters of acceptable governance. Within this framework, Structural Adjustment operated less as a technical economic intervention and more as a disciplinary apparatus that institutionalised market liberalisation while delegitimising state-led developmental alternatives.

Admittedly, Ghana's acceptance of Structural Adjustment cannot be reduced to simple foreign coercion. The state faced genuine economic crisis, and some reforms contributed to short-term stabilisation: the IMF noted that inflation fell from 142% in 1983 to 10% by the end of 1991 (IMF, n.d.). Yet this qualification exposes the central problem rather than resolving it: Ghana's "choice" occurred under conditions of dependency so severe that refusal was barely viable. The issue, therefore, is not whether Ghana consented, but whether consent under financial compulsion can represent meaningful sovereignty. Thus, Ghana does not prove that Structural Adjustment was simply "imperialism by another name"; rather, it shows how imperialism became viable precisely because it could operate through consent, crisis management, and institutional expertise. The appearance of voluntary agreement masked a deeper asymmetry of power, where legal sovereignty survived but substantive economic autonomy became conditional. In this sense, Ghana demonstrated that twentieth century imperialism survived by relocating domination from colonial administration into the institutional management of economic possibility.

Ultimately, the proposition that the twentieth century ended imperialism as a viable practice is only persuasive if imperialism is understood exclusively as formal territorial conquest. While decolonialisation dismantled the legal structures of empire and established sovereignty as the dominant principle of international relations, it did not eliminate the unequal power relations through which imperial influence has historically operated. Instead, imperialism adapted to changing political realities, replacing direct rule with more subtle mechanisms of domination that were often more sustainable and less politically costly. The Caribbean

demonstrated the persistence of economic dependency within global capitalism; the Congo reveals how military intervention and geopolitical interests constrained postcolonial sovereignty; and Ghana illustrates how international financial institutions exercised influence through debt and conditionality rather than occupation. Collectively, these cases suggest that the twentieth century transformed, rather than terminated, imperialism, relocating power from territorial possession to the economic, political, and institutional management of formally independent states, Consequently, imperialism remained not only viable but arguably more adaptable than ever before,

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