

**BRICS**  
An Anti-Capitalist Critique



# BRICS

## An Anti-Capitalist Critique

edited by  
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# Introduction

ANA GARCIA AND PATRICK BOND

This book addresses the prospects of imperial power from above, emerging powers from the middle and nascent popular counter-powers from below. The relative economic decline of the United States, Europe and Japan is often linked to the rise of an ‘emerging’ bloc comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (BRICS). But the latter regularly demand ‘a seat at the table’ in a process that some term ‘antagonistic cooperation’. That means, in practice, that in areas ranging from world finance to climate change to super-exploitative relations with the periphery and even to soccer, the bloc aims not to overturn tables at the proverbial temple, but to collaborate in holding them up. Consider some recent evidence:

- After funding the International Monetary Fund (IMF) with US\$75 billion in 2012, in the following year there were two meetings of BRICS leaders (in Durban and St. Petersburg) which pronounced growing dissatisfaction with the Bretton Woods Institutions.
- The BRICS’ stated intention to create a New Development Bank with capital of US\$50 billion, and an IMF-style Contingent Reserve Arrangement with US\$100 billion, was accomplished in 2014 at the Fortaleza summit, but ultimately, given the role of neoliberal finance ministers in their conceptualisation, these were celebrated in Washington as complementary to, not competitive with, the existing multilateral financial power structure.
- A Brazilian directs the World Trade Organisation and, based on a more aggressive policy of liberalisation, tries to break persistent blockages between

the US and EU that hinder the growth of global trade.

- Chinese and Indian economists occupy a second tier of the bureaucracies in the World Bank and IMF.
- Climate negotiations at the global scale increasingly revolve around Washington's managed relations with BRICS countries, first through the deal done in 2009 in Copenhagen (involving four of the five BRICS) and then the US-China emissions cuts agreed to bilaterally in 2014.
- In other bilateral relations with South Africa and India, US President Barack Obama made substantial progress in trips, respectively, during 2013 (twice) and 2015.
- Soccer remains the most symbolic and profitable commercial component of sports in the imperialist project, with FIFA machinery controlling the game's World Cup in alliance with elites from host countries South Africa, Brazil and Russia from 2010 to 2018, no matter the vast social costs involved in White Elephant stadium construction and suppression of local unrest. To add insult to injury, key BRICS countries supported Blatter's continual re-election to world soccer managerial leadership, notwithstanding vast evidence of wrongdoing during his five-term reign.

But there is also countervailing evidence:

- Several members of the BRICS have resisted demands by Western countries to impose stricter intellectual property controls (in the case of medicines this has saved millions of lives, especially in South Africa).
- Geopolitically, some BRICS leaders boldly challenged Washington after revelations of espionage by whistleblower Edward Snowden and before Washington's proposed bombing of Syria in 2013. In March 2014, the BRICS implicitly supported Russia in the conflict over Crimea, for which the G7 imposed sanctions and expelled Moscow (Putin had originally been scheduled to host the G8 meeting in Sochi a few weeks later). BRICS foreign ministers even successfully threatened to withdraw from the subsequent G20 summit in Australia in late 2014, were it to have become a G19 without Russia.
- In May 2014, Russia agreed to supply gas to China using local currencies, not the US dollar, seeking to partially reduce Russia's dependence on sales to the European market as sanctions resulting from the Ukraine chaos loomed.
- In early 2015, dramatic economic developments began unfolding as this book went to press, as emerging markets faced financial stress, as the Russian rouble crashed because of sanctions and the oil price collapse, and as China initiated

an Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, whose co-founders included the richest European countries and the Bretton Woods Institutions, leaving the Obama administration diplomatically embarrassed.

These incidents suggest the possibility that at least two of the BRICS – China and Russia – occasionally adopt ‘inter-imperial’ stances against Western powers, but in a stop-start way that is quite unpredictable. At the same time, however, the underlying BRICS project has much in common with the Western status quo regarding the stabilisation of the financial world, in generating additional capacities of ‘lender of last resort’ and in stabilising multilateral governance. BRICS still provides a sustained demand for the US dollar, despite monetary turbulence due to Federal Reserve policies; it is distressing but true that Chinese dollar purchases soared to record highs during the first half of 2014, only declining slightly a year later.

Moreover, the BRICS countries promote an extractive, high-carbon economic model which threatens to amplify the catastrophic environmental and social destruction of advanced capitalism. The role of the BRICS in the *de facto* derailing of the Kyoto Protocol to limit climate change is revealing: Russia endorsed the Treaty in 2005 but withdrew in 2012, while in 2009 the other BRICS leaders joined Barack Obama to promote the Copenhagen Accord in behind-the-scenes negotiations. That 2009 deal rejected a mandatory limit on emissions, and at subsequent UN Framework Convention on Climate Change Conferences of the Parties, BRICS countries (including host South Africa in 2011) were among those joining Washington as most resistant to binding emissions cuts and payment of climate debt. By 2011 in South Africa, they had agreed to whittle away the critical notion of ‘common but differentiated responsibility’ for the crisis, to the detriment of the world’s poorest and lowest-emitting countries.

As for Snowden’s revelations, the surveillance of citizens seems as severe in the BRICS countries as in the anglophone West, in a style reminiscent of George Orwell’s *1984*, reaching even into the South African parliament in February 2015, when journalists’ cellphones and Wi-Fi signals were jammed by Pretoria’s security apparatus. The BRICS’ criminalisation of social movements and the oppression of dissidents are even worse than in the G7. The economic and political domination of the BRICS’ less-developed neighbours is a growing concern, leading critics to postulate the incorporation of sub-imperialist BRICS into world capitalism, just as Ruy Mauro Marini wrote regarding the position of Brazil more than 40 years ago.

### **Resistance and ideological vacillation**

However, as we conclude in the last pages, the contradictions that characterise all the BRICS have created incisive forms of social resistance. These include some of the largest protests and other social convulsions in the world, though some have expressed a conservative bias (Brazil) or articulated liberal ideals (India, Russia and Hong Kong). But other resistance struggles against mega-projects are manifestations of the limits to the BRICS' pro-corporate economic growth model. Most progressive activists mistrust the rhetoric of the BRICS governments, which promise prosperity for their countries by following the current trajectory of global neoliberalism, especially in alliance with one another.

Other radical activists and Third Worldist analysts have supported the BRICS governments, though, believing that their claims of wanting to democratise the world order might do more than simply add a layer of collaborators. There is not yet a consistent approach on the left, as progressive forces in each country operate still unaware of possible concrete links with other movements in the other BRICS countries, and even in their own hinterlands which BRICS corporations are busy exploiting. The critical question for the future is whether social struggles in each of the BRICS countries will discover linkages of solidarity between peoples, on the basis of reversing the path of the elites and creating paths for another kind of development.

This connection between the struggles and collective experiences of resistance and construction of alternatives is what we call 'BRICS from below'. Considering the various stances taken towards BRICS using a class analysis, we can discern some rough ideological positions towards this bloc of countries: 'BRICS from above' (the position of government and corporate bodies), 'Brics from the middle' (the position of some academics, think tanks and NGOs), 'BRICS from below' (grassroots social movements that can create common bonds of struggle and transnational solidarity), and, finally, those looking at BRICS from a pro-Western corporate perspective. The latter are adherents of the old capitalist order based on US hegemony, and fear the rise of the BRICS. We describe these positions, with three nuanced perspectives in the main categories, within the box below, based especially on experiences in South Africa.

From this attempt to organise ideological positioning, it is possible to identify various analyses of this group of countries. Recall that the first appearance of the acronym BRIC was in 2001, offered by Jim O'Neill of Goldman Sachs to identify promising markets for financial investors. There were those who discredited the bloc as an incoherent collection, arguing that these countries have nothing in common with each other. Others have considered these countries as a possible

threat to US hegemony, aspiring to have more power and participation in the international order, with demands to the traditional powers to adjust rules and standards accordingly. Others have celebrated the rise of the BRICS as the democratisation of the world order, without which it will be impossible to find solutions to the global financial crisis which began in the US.

Because of the BRICS' apparent importance, funding agencies began to allocate resources to projects and academic papers on the topic, and the BRICS states also officially supported alliances of generally pro-government, pro-business academics and think tanks. In early 2015, the Russian government established a 'Civic BRICS' to involve 500 approved representatives from the five countries plus guest countries. The strategy was in part, according to the *civilbrics.ru* website, 'to make decisions made at the Summit more legitimate,' which in turn led the main Brazilian civil society network (Rebrip) to formally dissociate from the process, given Putin's record of repressing Russian NGOs hostile to the Moscow regime.

Even though three of the five BRICS were suffering severe economic problems by 2015, with the end of China's boom adding to world economic dislocation, much of the analysis coming from mainstream academics and NGOs has been upbeat in tone. The texts gathered below aim to fill a gap in studies, events and documents dealing with BRICS: critical analysis of these economies and societies within the framework of a global capitalism that is increasingly predatory, exclusionary and unequal, in many cases quite explicitly so within the BRICS themselves. We take up the challenge of bringing together a set of chapters from different approaches, albeit all 'anti-capitalist', reflecting upon the uncertain rise of a 'Global South (and East)', which is sometimes cooperative with and sometimes antagonistic to the traditional powers (US, Europe and Japan, plus the main multilateral institutions).

Most importantly, the BRICS' rise occurs in the context of the expansion and deepening of capitalism in the 21st century, and also in the midst of world capitalism's worst crisis since the 1930s. The point of critical anti-capitalist analysis of this sort is to thereby strengthen understandings of where BRICS fit in the world economy and global governance, how their own companies' capital accumulation strategies are developing, how national political dynamics comply, and how networks of resistance have begun to respond. The goal is simple: contribute to building transnational solidarity towards a 'BRICS from below' that genuinely defends the interests of people, environment and sovereignty in both BRICS and their hinterlands, against the depredations of capitalism.

TEN IDEOLOGICAL STANDPOINTS IN RELATION TO THE BRICS

1. *BRICS from above* – heads of state, corporates and elite allies

- 1.1 BRICS as *anti-imperialist*: foreign ministry *rhetoric* – ‘Talk Left, Walk Right’ – based upon national-liberation traditions, with some concrete actions (such as opposition to Intellectual Property applied to medicines, especially for AIDS, safe haven for US spy whistleblower Edward Snowden, and hostility to the proposed US bombing of Syria in 2013)
- 1.2 BRICS as *sub-imperialist*: re-legitimisation of ‘globalisation’, lubricating neoliberalism in – and exploiting – BRICS hinterlands, intensifying structural exploitation of the poor / workers / women / nature on behalf of global / local capital, ensuring maximum greenhouse gas emissions alongside BASIC / US no matter the local / continental / global consequences, and even sometimes playing a ‘deputy sheriff’ role to world hegemon
- 1.3 BRICS as *inter-imperialist*: potential new internet delinked from the US; promotion of Putin v Obama in September 2013 at G20; and backing Russia in Crimea/Ukraine conflict

2. *Brics from the middle* – BRICS Academic Forum, intellectuals, trade unions, NGOs

- 2.1 *pro-BRICS advocates*: most of Academic Forum, most establishment ‘think tanks’, the ‘Civic BRICS’ initiated by Russia, and others (including leftists) claiming BRICS will increasingly challenge global injustices
- 2.2 *wait-and-see about BRICS*: most NGOs and their funders – as well as most ‘Third Worldist’ intellectuals – who wish for BRICS to become ‘anti-imp’ in the UN and Bretton Woods Institutions, using the New Development Bank and Contingent Reserve Arrangement, etc.
- 2.3 *critics of BRICS*: those associated with BRICS-from-below networks who consider BRICS to be ‘sub-impis’ and sometimes also ‘inter-impis’

3. BRICS from below – grassroots activists whose visions run local to global
  - 3.1 *localist*: stuck within local or sectoral silos, including myriad momentary ‘popcorn protests’ (even some against BRICS corporations or projects) that are insurgent, unstrategic, at constant risk of becoming xenophobic, and prone to populist demagoguery
  - 3.2 *nationally bound*: most civil society activists who are vaguely aware of BRICS and are hostile to it, yet who are so bound up in national and sectoral battles – most of which counteract BRICS’ agenda – that they fail to link up even in areas that would serve their interests
  - 3.3 *solidaristic-internationalist*: ‘global justice movement’ allies providing solidarity to allies across the BRICS when they are repressed and jointly campaigning for human and ecological rights against common BRICS enemies (such as Vale, the China Development Bank, DBSA, Transnet/mega-shipping, fossil fuel corporations and other polluters, and the coming BRICS Development Bank)
4. pro-West business – most organic intellectuals of business connected to Old Money, multinational-corporate branch plants, northern-centric institutions and political parties, all increasingly worried that BRICS may act as a coherent anti-Western bloc some day (a phenomenon mainly evident in South Africa, given its important unpatriotic bourgeoisie)

### The architecture of this book

Thus, two goals were established for this collection. The first is to bring together analyses that prompt debate between social movements, organised labour and other activists in the struggle for social justice and for alternatives to the current international capitalist order; such debate was lively in counter-summits in South Africa in 2013 and Brazil in 2014, and we hope it will continue in coming years as contradictions in the world system and BRICS countries are heightened. BRICS is a new and rather tentative area of concern for many of the anti-neoliberal social movements, but we are confident that the same critical sensibilities will prevail, and that those movements and NGOs which temporarily endorsed the uncritical optimism of BRICS from above will continue reflecting upon the many downsides associated with elite practices. The second goal is to generate critical academic debate involving contemporary themes and theoretical discussions, such as whether BRICS represent cases of sub-imperialism, orthodox neo-developmentalism and what in Latin America is derisively termed ‘extractivism’.

These objectives have been largely achieved. A first set of chapters considers the categories of imperialism, sub-imperialism and capital-imperialism.

- Patrick Bond discusses how sub-imperialism has emerged as a theoretical category, with a focus on the characteristics of semi-peripheral accumulation, hinterland exploitation, internal modes of super-exploitation and the reproduction of a world system based on neoliberalism and military aggression.
- Mathias Luce revisits Ruy Mauro Marini's formulations within the Marxist theory of dependency, and he develops a comprehensive theory of sub-imperialism as the 'highest stage of dependent capitalism'. This results in a new hierarchy in the world system, with intermediate links in the imperialist chain, a position held especially by Brazil, South Africa and India. According to Luce, however, China and Russia cannot be characterised similarly.
- Virginia Fontes is already working with a new category, 'capital-imperialism', in order to understand transformations of contemporary capitalism and its new economic, political and social contradictions. For Fontes, the dominance exercised by the core countries must be understood not as something external, but internalised in other countries, with BRICS countries revealing a subordinate membership within capital-imperialist expansion.
- Leo Panitch provides the perspective on imperialism which he and Sam Gindin have pioneered, in which older theories of inter-imperial rivalry and capital export have less relevance in view of the post-War centrality of US institutions. These still define the scope for all other actors, including the BRICS. If the BRICS are less easy to incorporate than Washington's G7 allies, Panitch is also interested in their internal contestations, including Chinese, Brazilian and South African class struggles.
- Claudio Katz analyses the general status of what he calls emerging, intermediate and peripheral neoliberalism. Katz scans the BRICS as well as Turkey and other countries in the process of emergence. He stresses, especially, contradictions within semi-peripheral capitalism, and considers food price inflation and the super-exploitation of labour to have great importance, perhaps setting the stage for new revolts linking production and social reproduction processes.

These attempts to set the global context lead us to a second set of chapters on corporate and political expansion of BRICS in Africa and Latin America, the sites of our utmost concern in 2013–14 due to the regional 'gateway' claims of the



BRICS hosts those years. Russia in Eastern Europe prompted similar concerns in 2015.

- From a Southern African perspective, Baruti Amisi, Patrick Bond, Richard Kamidza, Farai Maguwu and Bobby Peek expound on the role of the BRICS in Africa, especially Mozambique and Zimbabwe, mainly through investment opportunities in the extractive sector and large infrastructure projects with adverse impacts on societies and the environment. The authors fear that the BRICS New Development Bank will facilitate the ‘resource curse’ evident in so much of Africa. BRICS elites, both political leaders and corporations, are allies of the local ruling classes, they argue, in Africa’s ongoing underdevelopment.
- Ana Garcia and Karina Kato explore Brazilian insertions in Angola and Mozambique through National Social and Economic Development Bank financing, direct investment from private and public companies, and the policies of ‘development cooperation’. The authors emphasise three themes: the identification of priority sectors and their institutional arrangements; the unique role of the state in each of these countries and the ambiguous relationship and conflict with Brazilian actors and projects; and new forms of ‘South–South debt’ generated from these transactions, with consequences for the economies of African countries.
- In Latin America, similar maldevelopment is visible. Omar Bonilla provides an Ecuadorian perspective on oil geopolitics in relation to the Chinese companies which have adapted quickly to policy changes in the Andean region. There, little has been done to comply with national and international human rights standards. In Ecuador, Chinese companies have contributed significantly to the expansion of the extractive frontier, with special concerns about the Yasuní National Park, showing little interest in improving working conditions and the environment even in the world’s most ambitious campaign site for ‘leaving oil in the soil’.
- Pedro Henrique Campos considers the internationalisation of Brazilian construction conglomerates. For him, the thesis of Brazilian sub-imperialism is insufficient, since it is not the narrowness of the market that explains the performance of companies abroad, but the experience and expansive capacity of capital developed in Brazil, before and especially during the civil-military dictatorship. This is due to the state’s broad support and encouragement, especially in priority regions, for Brazilian foreign policy within South America and Africa.

- Judith Marshall offers a comprehensive analysis of the overall performance of the Brazilian mining company Vale and its impacts on workers and communities in Canada, Mozambique and Brazil itself. The behaviour of Vale exemplifies the worst tendencies of large mining companies, and contributes to global tensions by increasing the gap between rich and poor, along with exacerbating environmental degradation wherever it seeks minerals. A global civil society campaign is underway to link its victims' resistances.
- Both South Africa and Brazil suffered sub-imperial soccer temptations when it came to hosting the World Cup in 2010 and 2014, and Russia's turn is in 2018. Einar Braathen, Celina Sørbøe and Gilmar Mascarenhas discuss the allocation of resources for mega-events in a country, Brazil, whose institutional capacity to protect human rights and the environment was disappointingly fragile. In the context of neoliberal global competition among countries, the authors show how what they term 'cities of exception' are sold as 'global cities'. Exemplified by Rio de Janeiro, these cities seek to build coalitions between government and companies seeking 'opportunities for urban entrepreneurialism'. The FIFA 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympics are creating a social backlash and the social sensibility that even the poorest people have a 'right to the city'.
- Moving to Eastern Europe, Ruslan Dzarasov locates Russia within the world system. It is, 'on the one hand, dependent on the core, but on the other aspires to control its own regional periphery in the area of the former USSR'. The contradictions can be seen in the way the parasitic fractions of the bourgeoisie pothole Russia's road back to regional dominance, in part through massive capital flight.
- Gonzalo Pozo adds more detail, especially in scoping out both the neoliberal nature of the Putin regime and its inter-imperial character. These features relate closely to the character of capital accumulation involving apparatchiks and the new bourgeoisie.

Finally, a group of shorter papers explore critical and contrarian positions on the BRICS within the world system. These contributions include analyses by William Robinson, Elmar Altvater, Sam Moyo and Paris Yeros, Susanne Soederberg, Ho-fung Hung, Achin Vanaik, Vijay Prashad, Immanuel Wallerstein, Niall Reddy and ourselves. While some – by Robinson, Vanaik, Prashad and Wallerstein – are overarching in scope, we also feel that specific moments and sectors are vital for understanding the internal contradictions. Altvater tackles environment, Moyo and Yeros consider super-exploitation, Soederberg looks at strategies of financial

incorporation through consumer credit, and Ho-fung Hung locates China in the World System.

Finally, along with Reddy's contribution on Fortaleza, we as editors round off the volume by briefly taking up the lessons of recent summits, especially from the standpoint of resistance. In our conclusion, we reflect upon the possibilities of building a 'BRICS-from-below' coalition to watchdog and then resist the role played by BRICS in world capitalism. During a decade in which popular rebellions have multiplied, including within each of the BRICS, it is urgent that these networks arise and generate an effective solidaristic praxis, both nationally and internationally. In our view, the BRICS New Development Bank poses the biggest future challenge for those social groups that have been resisting international financial institutions, extractivist maldevelopment and ecological destruction, and the related effects of mega-infrastructure projects. The Contingent Reserve Arrangement looks likely to smuggle in Washington Consensus ideology directly from the International Monetary Fund, along with increased Bretton Woods direct influence (thanks to a clause limiting BRICS borrowers to 30% of their borrowing quota until they agree on a formal structural adjustment programme, a problem we anticipate South Africa will suffer first as sovereign debt crisis looms). The ongoing downturn in several BRICS economies makes the extractive, export-oriented economic approach less tenable, even as BRICS corporations more desperately intensify their search for new terrains for accumulation. The potential for sane climate change management will be dashed in the process.

These chapters were mainly generated during debates about the BRICS in the two most recent summit host countries, South Africa and Brazil, in 2013–14, with updates provided in 2015 in preparation for the Russian summit. A short pamphlet was distributed to Durban BRICS counter-summit attendees in March 2013, much of which was published in the *Pambazuka* African ezines in March–April 2013 and March 2014. Then, as synthesis emerged in many critical accounts, a similar version of this book was prepared in Portuguese for the Fortaleza summit in July 2014, in partnership with the journal *Tensões Mundiais* (World Tensions) of the State University of Ceará. These publications are thanked for their willingness to test out our critique of the BRICS.

We thank greatly all authors who have contributed to this project, as they considerably raised the quality of the discussions about the BRICS. We are also grateful to Camilla Costa, from the Centre for Nationalities research network headquartered at the State University of Ceará; Bonaventure Monjane from the Centre for Civil Society, University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban, whose work

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PB – Durban

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