

A Cruel Hoax: The Political Economy Of Anti-immigration



Richard D. Wolff

02-28-2025 ~ Deporting immigrants may deliver electoral wins to politicians if voters have been sufficiently cultivated by years of demonizing and scapegoating them. For its victims, the cruelties involved are horrific. Yet such deportation makes little sense economically. It represents a nationally self-destructive program based on a faulty grasp of immigration economics. What once “made America great” (at least for the majority white population) were its successive waves of immigrants. What underscored the American economy’s strength was its ability to absorb and integrate those waves despite frictions among them: a genuinely productive melting pot. My American schooling through my PhD stressed such points.

What then reversed such a positive understanding of immigration? What converted immigration instead into an urgent danger to American greatness? What lets Trump pose as “protecting” us by sharply reducing immigration and massively deporting immigrants? (By “immigrants” I mean the vast majority of people who are poor and join the working class at low levels of pay. Foreign-born U.S. residents comprise about 14 percent of the total population or roughly 46 million. About 12 million of them are undocumented.)

Answers to such questions lie in the political economy of immigration. Yet those answers and the political economy that generates them are stunningly absent from popular debates and consciousness. The Republican party’s recent years of anti-immigration rhetoric plus the immigrant deportation policies in place across the last three presidencies illustrate that absence. Many politicians from both the

Republican and Democratic parties support deportation as the necessary response to the “costly invasions” of immigrants (often equated to criminals). Yet evidence for this demonization program has been very scarce. Its proponents seem largely ignorant of the actual economics of immigration.

Most immigrants coming to the United States are young adults. The young can best manage migration’s hardships and dangers. They can most readily fill the hardest jobs at the lowest pay that their desperate and vulnerable circumstances force on them. The undocumented among them are the most vulnerable. They dare not complain to the police or other government officials when employers take advantage of them and abuse them. Immigrants often send portions of their wages (“remittances”) back to the countries they left. Remittances help care for children, the elderly, and others who remained there and partially compensate those countries of origin for losing their emigrants’ productivity.

Before adult immigrants arrived in the United States, their upbringing was financed by their countries of origin. Their families and governments spent considerable sums feeding, clothing, sheltering, educating, etc., them from birth to 15-18 years of age. They “invested” in their young people but obtained little income from that investment because the young adults migrated to the United States. Their years of productivity benefited the U.S. economy, not the economy of the countries that invested in them.

In contrast, people born and raised in the United States face heavy economic costs *for the U.S. economy* before they become working adults. U.S. families partly defray those costs (food, clothing, and shelter). The federal, state, and local governments defray other parts of those costs (public schooling, public services, etc.). Since relatively few U.S. adults emigrate, the U.S. economy reaps their adult productivity as a return on its investment in their upbringing. Added to that payoff, the United States secures the productivity of immigrants they did not invest in.

Since many of the countries immigrants belong to are often among the poorer countries, the immigration of their citizens to the United States represents a subsidy from and by the poor nations. Migration not only reflects the international inequalities of global capitalism but it also worsens them. Migrants’ countries of origin lose the adult productivity they need most. Migration transfers those benefits to the rich countries that need them the least.

That “great” American past that MAGA celebrates comprised many decades of massive and successive waves of immigrants. Impressive U.S. GDP growth in the 19th and 20th centuries owed more than a little to the subsidies provided by immigrants. Early waves of immigrants stimulated economic growth that in turn attracted, welcomed, and incorporated later waves. Each immigrant wave struggled, and most of them eventually achieved rising wages; some even rose out of the working class to become employers. Immigration and growth facilitated each other in a cycle that many found “exceptional.”

As each immigrant wave arrived, its members mostly endured the worst jobs and the lowest pay and lived in the worst housing and neighborhoods underserved by public services, such as inferior schools for their children. When the next wave arrived, its members accepted the same. The economic growth that earlier waves of immigrants contributed to eventually enabled their struggles for better jobs, pay, and housing to succeed. That growth also enabled the later waves of immigrants who replaced the earlier ones at the lowest rungs of the nation’s social ladder.

Thus, almost all immigrants could reasonably foresee better years ahead. The United States could boast about a remarkable degree of “social mobility.” Carefully exaggerated by “rags to riches” fables like those in the many [novels of Horatio Adler](#) (1832-1899), working-class belief in social mobility served social peace and often blunted socialism’s appeal.

This analysis has so far treated migration in terms of its national or macroeconomic effects. Migration also has microeconomic effects: its impact on the employee-employer relationship. Immigrants usually work for less pay than native-born employees will accept. Undocumented immigrants accept still less. Because immigrants can represent a real competitive threat, the native-born, better-paid workers can fear, resent, and oppose their presence. Demagogues often see opportunities to obtain votes by reflecting and reinforcing that resentment and opposition. If the migrants display “racial” differences, demagogues can integrate racism (traditional or new) to aggravate the competition between immigrant and native-born employees.

Employers have often played immigrants against native-born employees and undocumented immigrants against both. Employers’ divide and conquer methods have prevented united actions by native and immigrant employees and blocked or

destroyed labor unions and strikes. On the other hand, in recent years, significant portions of the U.S. labor movement have revived partly by pointedly unifying immigrant (documented and undocumented) and non-immigrant employees and, thereby, defeating employers. Not surprisingly, some employers, worried about a reviving labor movement, cultivated a backlash to reinforce divisions among employees. Demonization of immigration appealed to them. Denunciations of and demands to remove diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) commitments became popular covers for and companions to anti-immigrant agitation.

In the United States, recent presidents have sought votes by using hostile words and actions against immigrants. Those presidents' plans and resulting deportations responded to several years of large immigration. Political demagogues and racists played their usual roles. Trump lifted them into his campaigns and presidencies. His second term targets the most massive deportation in U.S. history.

U.S. employers will regret the deportations' reduction of profitable and low-wage immigrant employees (and especially undocumented employees). Of course, employers retain their usual alternative of automation: replacing ever more workers with computers, robots, and AI. Millions deprived of government jobs (via Trump, Musk, and DOGE) will join those technologically displaced to compete for shrinking job opportunities in the U.S. private sector. The Trumpian objective is a working class cleansed of immigrants, unions, and DEI sensitivities. It is a MAGA world that has successfully resubordinated most non-whites, women, immigrants, and all others deemed inferior by the likes of Trump and Musk, and those they select.

Immigration always served chiefly the needs of U.S. capitalism. Migration was always costly, dangerous, and painful to the migrants who mostly lacked other ways to survive. The U.S. working class was often threatened by immigration and thus saw it negatively, but it lacked the political power to stop it. On the other hand, the working class also appreciated the survival and opportunities immigration offered their families and ancestors. In that way, they saw immigration positively.

Over several recent decades, slow, uneven economic growth redistributed U.S. wealth and income upward. A declining U.S. empire coupled with rising global competition (especially from China), climate change's mounting effects, and

consequent global conflicts drove large migrations to the United States just as its jobs, incomes, and opportunities were being squeezed. Immigration's perceived negative effects came to outweigh the positive ones. Enough of the U.S. working class's sympathy for and appreciation of immigration declined to give right-wing demagogues their latest big opportunity.

The demagogues exploited the changed conditions and attitudes of the United States working class to shake up U.S. politics. Daily executive orders have undone the formerly stable political consensus of alternating GOP and Democratic governments during the upswing of the U.S. empire in the 19th and 20th centuries. Since then, as the U.S. empire and capitalism commenced their mutually reinforcing decline, Republicans and Democrats turned ever more harshly on each other. Their old political establishment crumbled in bitter conflicts.

Immigration became one flashpoint, one way to define a new political direction out of the decline that no party politician could dare admit to. Trump has so far best grasped the opportunity to ride an extreme position on immigration—mass deportation—to power. However, since it will soon become apparent that deporting immigrants solves little and worsens the U.S. decline, the political project's prospects are dubious.

Much the same applies to other projects envisaged by him and Elon Musk. These include the neocolonialist plans to take over the Panama Canal, Greenland, and Gaza, and make Canada the 51st state of the United States. These also include imposing tariffs around the world and disconnecting the United States from global efforts related to climate change and health initiatives (WHO). Abandoning the Ukraine war and shifting its costs onto the Europeans may provoke their resistance and reactions frustrating Trump and Musk in unanticipated ways.

As with immigration, the political economics of other Trump-Musk projects (and much of Project 2025) raise similar profound questions about their logic, blind spots, and unintended consequences. The deep contradictions of anti-immigration—and other projects—are not overcome by hiding them under the veneer of slogans like "America First." We continue to experience the American version of what "declining empire" means.

By Richard D. Wolff

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Trump's Plan For Gaza Would Make Colonial Plunder Great Again



James K. Boyce - Photo by Matthew Cavanaugh

02-27-2025 ~ *In an interview, economist James K. Boyce discusses the relationship between war and economics, and how Trump's talk of taking over Gaza and turning it into the "Riviera of the Middle East" is similar to the U.S. dispossession of Native Americans.*

Can economics fuel conflict and war? Absolutely, and history is full of such examples. But economics can also pave the way to lasting peace, according to progressive economist James K. Boyce.

In the interview that follows, professor Boyce discusses the economics of war and the role that economics can play in peacemaking, including in places like Ukraine and [Gaza](#), although he acknowledges that daunting challenges lie ahead for these two war-torn areas of the world. As for U.S. President Donald Trump's [plan](#) for Gaza, Boyce puts it side by side with the disposition of Native Americans in the United States.

[James K. Boyce](#) is professor emeritus of economics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and a senior fellow of the Political Economy Research Institute (PERI). He is the author of [Investing in Peace: Aid and Conditionality after Civil Wars](#) and editor of [Peace and the Public Purse: Economic Policies for Postwar Statebuilding](#) and [Economic Policy for Building Peace: The Lessons of El Salvador](#). He received the 2024 Global Inequality Research Award and the 2017 Leontief Prize for Advancing the Frontiers of Economic Thought. This interview is based on his seven-part [video series](#) released by the Institute for New Economic Thinking.

C. J. Polychroniou: Conflicts across the world have surged [since 2020](#), making this one of the most violent periods since the end of the Cold War. The wars in Ukraine and Gaza have been most visible in the news, but there have been dozens of other conflicts, too. What lessons can we draw from history about the economics of war, the topic of your recent [video series](#) from the Institute for New Economic Thinking? How about if we start with the wars of conquest during the era of colonialism?

James K. Boyce: Economics is not just about mutually beneficial exchanges entered into by mutually consenting adults, though you could be forgiven for thinking so if your only acquaintance with the subject was a typical textbook. Real-world economics also is about coercive relationships in which one side benefits and the other loses. Such interactions—which can be grouped under the general rubric of plunder—involve not only outright force but also the manipulation of governments and markets, often occurring in the grey area between what is legal and what is not.

The colonial wars of conquest were a particularly naked example of plunder. Slavery, the appropriation of lands and minerals, and the monopolization of commerce were common features of the time, thinly cloaked, if at all, by the pretense of a “civilizing” mission. But it would be wrong to imagine that plunder disappeared with the end of formal colonial rule. It remains a ubiquitous feature of the world economy, now sometimes cloaked by the veneer of “modernization” or “development.” Because plunder is inherently antagonistic—it pits the plunderers against the those whose resources and livelihoods are plundered—it can and often does morph into violence and war.

C. J. Polychroniou: What about more recent conflicts, like the wars in Bosnia (1992-1995) and Afghanistan (2001-2021)? How did economics figure into these?

James K. Boyce: Economics is not the whole story in these or most conflicts, but it is an important part of why they begin, how long they persist, and how they finally end.

Bosnia emerged as an independent nation during the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Some commentators blamed “ancient ethnic hatreds” for the violence that accompanied Yugoslavia’s dissolution, but tensions arising from economic disparities among its provinces were also at play. Within Bosnia, three main “ethnic” groups lived side by side—Muslim Bosniaks, Catholic Croats, and Orthodox Serbs—and the fighting largely devolved along these lines (I place “ethnic” in quotation marks, because apart from religious origins the three were hard to distinguish). But another underlying axis of conflict was the deep economic gulf between urban Bosnians (often Bosniaks), who benefited in Yugoslavia from good education, health, and pension systems, and rural Bosnians (often Serbs), who were excluded from the benefits of engagement in the formal economy.

Once war broke out, opportunities for plunder became a key driving force in the conflict. Hardliners who engaged in ethnic cleansing—killing minorities and driving them out—not only sought to establish homogeneous enclaves for “their” people but also to gain personally from seizing the businesses, homes, land, and other property the victims left behind.

Economic incentives, in the form of promises of postwar reconstruction aid, played a key role in the end of the war, too, persuading the warring parties to

sign the 1995 Dayton Peace Accord. Dayton, in a sense, was an aid-for-peace bargain. So economics was very much implicated in all phases of the Bosnian conflict.

The 2001-2021 war in Afghanistan was in many ways a resumption of the 1979-1989 war, with the difference that now it was the United States instead of the Soviet Union that occupied Kabul while the countryside largely remained under the control of the Taliban and regional warlords. As in Bosnia, pronounced economic disparities between urban and rural areas fueled the Afghan conflict, and the Taliban tapped into rural discontent. Wide disparities between Kabul and the rest of the country predated the Soviet and American invasions, and were further exacerbated by the wartime influx of foreigners and their money. Meanwhile, by controlling the opium traffic and taxing cross-border trade, the Taliban built a viable economic base of their own.

Economics played a central role in the U.S. war strategy, but it was not a pretty picture. In 2002, then-U.S. Defense Secretary Donald [Rumsfeld instructed](#) his senior aides to come up with “a plan for how we are going to deal with each of these warlords—who is going to get money from whom, on what basis, in exchange for what, what is the quid pro quo, etc.” The U.S. government poured nearly \$1 trillion into Afghanistan—\$145 billion in reconstruction aid plus \$837 billion in military expenditures—this in a country with a GDP of less than \$20 billion. War “[became the Afghan economy](#),” as *The New York Times* put it. The Afghan leadership, unsurprisingly, was more attentive to the demands of foreign donors than to the needs of their own citizens. Massive corruption fueled by external assistance fatally undermined any possibility of building a legitimate and effective state. “Our money was empowering a lot of bad people,” a senior [U.S. official recalled](#). “There was massive resentment among the Afghan people. And we were the most corrupt.”

Today 85% of Afghanistan’s people subsist on [less than one dollar a day](#). Whether the Taliban government or the so-called international community will act to address their deprivation and build a lasting peace is an open question.

C. J. Polychroniou: What role can economics play in peace building?

James K. Boyce: There is much to be said on this topic—it is the focus of the [video series](#)—and space precludes a full answer here. Let me highlight just two points.

First, economic policies can either reduce inequalities and the accompanying tensions or exacerbate them. This means not only “vertical” inequality between rich and poor, but also “horizontal” inequalities between groups defined on another basis, such as region, ethnicity, race, or religion. A single-minded focus on the total size of the economic pie—the conventional goals of growth and efficiency—is misplaced when conflicts over how it is sliced threaten to smash the pie.

Second, economic policies can either strengthen or weaken the bargaining power of pro-peace forces vis-à-vis those who seek to perpetuate the conflict. In Bosnia, for example, a crucial postwar issue was the return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their former homes. In some municipalities, local leaders welcomed them; in others, they actively obstructed returns, in part to protect their ill-gotten loot. In its “[Open Cities](#)” program, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees used reconstruction aid to reward municipalities that welcomed returns and to induce leaders on the fence to come down on the pro-peace side. The program’s implementation was not perfect, but the idea was sound. Again, “who” matters as much as “what.”

C. J. Polychroniou: How can we apply economics to the wars in Ukraine and Gaza? Can economic policies help to drive peace in those two war-torn areas?

James K. Boyce: The Trump administration’s “America first” stance seems likely to lead to a U.S. pullback from engagement in the tasks of peace building and state building in war-torn societies. In part, this reflects a disillusionment born of the dismal failures in Afghanistan and Iraq, and as those experiences suggest, disengagement may not be entirely a bad thing. But Ukraine and Gaza continue to loom large on the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

Trump often is described as “transactional” with good reason: For him, policy is about making deals. In both Ukraine and Gaza, economic considerations will be a big part of any deals we see. But it is by no means clear that forging a lasting peace will be the top priority for the dealmakers. If not, the end of the current wars could merely set the stage for future ones.

The Ukraine war is exhibit No. 1 of the dangers of fossil-fueled oligarchy. In addition to enormous environmental costs, fossil fuels carry a high political cost: They enable the autocratic rulers of petrostates to govern with little

accountability to either their own citizens or norms of international law. Vladimir Putin's Russia is a case in point. As Ukraine illustrates, fossil fueled-oligarchy can metastasize into fossil-fueled war.

Oil and gas revenues have sustained the Putin regime, notwithstanding international sanctions. The sanctions do, however, drive a wedge between the world market price and what Russia receives, so the prospect of lifting them could act as an incentive for Russia to accept a negotiated settlement. But if the Trump administration eases the sanctions without a peace agreement, while at the same time cutting military and financial aid to Ukraine, this will tilt the terms of the settlement in Russia's favor.

On the Ukrainian side, the prospect of large-scale reconstruction assistance—as well as an end to the carnage—may provide an incentive, too. It now appears that the responsibility for funding Ukraine's postwar reconstruction will fall mainly on Europe; whether the European nations will be willing and able to shoulder this burden remains to be seen. In an effort to shore up U.S. support, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has offered a [minerals-for-aid](#) deal that would give the U.S. access to [Ukraine's deposits](#) of lithium, uranium, and other critical minerals. But the minerals will be in the ground regardless of who controls the land above them, and it is [not evident](#) that the Trump administration will care much about that.

In Gaza, the latest war tragically illustrates what I call the "partition dilemma." The 1994 Oslo Accord sought to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by establishing the Palestinian Authority as a step toward a two-state solution. In the short run, partition can be an appealing way to stop the shooting. But in the longer run, it can set the stage for renewed conflict, as demagogues on both sides invoke fear of the other to enlist public support from their own people. Partition severely undermines the viability of leaders and parties that would appeal to pro-peace constituencies on both sides.

It is not surprising that 30 years after Oslo, we find Hamas on one side and the Netanyahu government on the other. The two feed off each other in a de facto alliance, each holding up the other as justification for its own politics of demonization. This helps to explain why the Netanyahu government not only tolerated but actively [facilitated](#) the flow of cash from Qatar to Hamas. In a candid moment back in 2015, Bezalel Smotrich, who is now Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu's finance minister, said that " [Hamas is an asset.](#)"

The chances that partition will lead to a lasting peace grow even slimmer if one side receives large-scale financial and military support with no strings attached—without [peace conditionality](#)—while the other does not. By emboldening one side and embittering the other, the resulting imbalance is a recipe for renewed conflict. Putin has oil and gas; Netanyahu has the United States. Rather than a negotiated settlement, the Israeli government now appears to be seeking a winner-take-all victory. Under the new U.S. administration, Netanyahu will face even fewer constraints than under the last one.

Trump's talk of [taking over Gaza](#) and turning it into the "Riviera of the Middle East" is reminiscent of plunder during the colonial era, including the dispossession of Native Americans in the United States. Yet in purely economic terms it makes a certain amount of sense: Beach resort development would indeed be a more profitable use of the land than maintaining Gaza as a place of confinement for 2 million refugees. Where other politicians see territory, Trump sees real estate.

The problem, of course, is what to do with Palestinians. There is one place that many of them might go willingly: the land of their grandparents, [Israel](#). The fact that option this is unmentionable, even unthinkable, tells us a lot.

If the war in Gaza and ongoing [displacement in the West Bank](#) do not end with the complete expulsion or annihilation of the Palestinians—a prospect that still seems inconceivable—the eventual outcome will be a single state in which the surviving Palestinians have a subordinate and marginalized status. Their struggle will then become one for equal rights. Economic policies could prove helpful at that point, but history suggests it will be a long, hard road.

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Haymarket Books, 2021), and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (Verso, 2021).

How Can The Study Of Hierarchy/Heterarchy Influence The Future?



Carole Crumley

02-27-2025 ~ *How new information changes theories.*

Hierarchies are a familiar form of human organization where individuals and groups of high social status are ranked above others and make decisions. Some examples are an oligarchy, a small group of committed individuals (sharing religion, wealth, etc.); an absolute monarchy that controls all the levers of power; and an activity that requires a clear chain of command (armies and firefighters) for a rapid and coordinated effort. Another form of human organization is a heterarchy, where individual and group status is based on behavior, values, and the willingness to work for the common good; decisions are taken cooperatively. (An earlier version of this article originally appeared as an entry for Heterarchy in the [International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences](#). 1) Examples of heterarchy are elected national assemblies, unions and guilds, or a group activity whose leaders have the requisite knowledge for the required tasks.

These are bare-bones characterizations—a continuum—rather than a one-or-the-other condition; sociopolitical governance is usually a mix, with strict rules for certain purposes and more flexible rules for others. Taken together, the two terms aid the examination of all sociopolitical systems and the study of how decisions are mediated and change over time.

A Traditional View of Social Complexity

Since archaeology's founding as a discipline in the 19th century, most interpretations have assumed a linear progression from small, early, and "simple" societies to those that were more populous, appeared later in time, and were "complex." Such a definition of complex (having more administrative levels) is in contrast to the definition of complexity in nonlinear systems (more richly networked). Political systems were assumed to have greater stability the more they tended toward tiered hierarchies of power.

In 1962, the American cultural anthropologist [Elman Service](#) introduced a framework classifying evolutionary stages of social and political organization into four categories: band, tribe, chiefdom, and state. He focused on the managerial benefits of the theory, which posits that chiefdoms arose due to the advantages of centralized leadership and culminated in the formation of states. In this model, leaders offer tangible benefits to their followers who consolidate the leader's power and support the expansion of bureaucratic organizations.

Since Service formulated this model of complexity in human societies, dissatisfaction with both the model and the underlying assumption has grown considerably. Scholars² have [complained](#) about the definition of these categories; the lack of clear evidence in the archaeological record; the failure of much archaeological data to fit a cultural evolutionary model; and the objectionable and persistent association with racism and colonialism. Most egregious is the assumption that ancient peoples and contemporary non-state groups are somehow less intelligent and creative than citizens of nation-states. This has played directly into Eurocentric convictions that conquest and colonial takeover were a favor to "backward" peoples. Today, scholars realize that throughout the course of human history, there were many different forms of self-governance.

The root problem has been the definition of complexity. Service understood complexity as many levels of governance, each subordinate to the one above (tiered). Heterarchies have many links (networked) of shifting importance over

time. A tiered administrative system describes the formal organization of states but, even in states, the social scaffolding is better revealed when governance is seen as a network, with both official entities (departments) and unofficial ones (groups and individuals who can fulfill various functions).

Heterarchy Reflects Real-Life Flexibility

Introducing the concept of heterarchy into the study of societies has helped to understand puzzling activities and structures that are found in the past and the present. It is not necessarily a replacement model so much as a complementary one; studying the interplay between the two systems can be particularly instructive.

First, the hierarchy-heterarchy relation admits both temporal and spatial flexibility. For example, governmental heterarchies can become more hierarchical over time, and vice versa, without collapsing. Heterarchical relationships among elements at one spatial scale or in one dimension (for example, members of the same club) may be hierarchical at another scale (the privilege of seniority in decision-making). Heterarchy is both a structure and a condition.

Applying the concept of heterarchy to the study of ancient and existing societies is likely to have many uses, and exploration has begun in some areas: heterarchies of scale, heterarchies of power, and heterarchies of values.

Heterarchies of Scale

[Spatial analysis](#) in archaeology facilitates the study of shifting configurations of occupied areas, how they were used by their inhabitants, and how socially equal households were. Service was operating under a general assumption common among archaeologists that, over time, increasing group size was related to its complexity, defined as the size of habitation and evidence of growing political centralization, elite activity, and social stratification. In the early 2020s, excavations in Eastern Europe revealed that there were cities of up to 320 hectares (almost 800 acres) with a population of 10,000 people as early as the fourth millennium BCE but, as inequality increased, the cities lost population and were abandoned. These large population aggregations in the past found mechanisms to reduce inequality but, when that ability diminished, [people left](#).³

Heterarchies of Power

Power relations are demonstrably the most complicated and important aspect of

the governance of human societies. It is particularly important to know how power shifts occur and under what conditions various power distributions constitute stable and unstable configurations. Studying this would greatly assist the study of change and perhaps explain how certain forms of governance can be associated with histories of stability and instability. Addressing the decreasing capacity of macro-states to control political and economic processes in a globalized world, political scientists have also found the concepts of heterarchy and complex systems useful in moving past [failing paradigms](#).⁴

Heterarchies of Values

Power relations are predicated on systems of values that, as conditions change, are ranked and reranked in their importance by individuals, groups, and organizations. Neuropsychologist and cybernetician [Warren McCulloch](#), who examined cognitive structures in the brain, called this collective organization a heterarchy.⁵ He demonstrated that the human brain is not organized hierarchically but adjusts to the reranking of values as circumstances change. McCulloch contrasted a hierarchy of (ranked) values with a heterarchy of values that defied both ranking and predictability. For example, an individual may be against abortion rights but support the death penalty (or vice versa). McCulloch's "nervous nets," the source of the brain's flexibility, are structurally similar to the adaptive capacities of fluidly organized and highly communicative groups. McCulloch's insight into the autonomous nature of information and communication in the brain revolutionized its neural study; it also solved major organizational problems in the fields of artificial intelligence and computer design. It is quintessentially human to make nimble [cognitive leaps](#) among scales.⁵

Notes:

1 Crumley, Carole L. (2007). "Heterarchy." In *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. Second edition, volume 3 (pp. 468-469). Darity, William A., editor-in-chief. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA.

2 Pauketat, Timothy R. (2007). *Chiefdoms and Other Archaeological Delusions*. Altamira.

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3 Hofmann, Robert; Müller-Scheeßel, Nils; and Müller, Johannes (2024). "Trypillia Mega-sites: A Social Levelling Concept?" *Antiquity* 98 (398): 380-400.

4 Cerny, Philip G., (ed.) (2023). *Heterarchy in World Politics: Innovations in International Affairs*. New York: Routledge.

5 McCulloch, Warren S. (1945) "A Heterarchy of Values Determined by the Topology of Neural Nets." *Bulletin of Mathematical Biophysics* 7:89-93.

By Carole Crumley

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The Coming Age Of Border Changes?



*John P. Ruehl -
Independent
Media Institute*

02-25-2025 ~ *Trump's remarks on annexing territory and recognizing Russian and Israeli territorial gains may align with his geopolitical ambitions, but the disruption to longstanding norms of fixed borders sets a risky precedent.*

Amid ongoing discussions over Donald Trump's plans for trying to resolve conflicts in Ukraine and Israel, the U.S. president has maintained steady pressure on NATO allies for months. After his 2024 election victory, Trump [again](#) raised the prospect of annexing the Danish territory of Greenland, having first done so [in 2019](#). Once dismissed as outlandish, his renewed push against a key ally sent shockwaves through Europe and the international community.

Trump also [declared](#) his intent to make Canada the 51st state in November 2024 and has [continued](#) reiterating his stance. [Violent conflict between the two nations occurred until the mid-19th century](#), but aggressive annexation today appears unthinkable due to the logistical challenges, deep ties, and friendly relations between the U.S. and Canada.

Yet Trump has [doubled down](#), with additional remarks about seizing the [Panama Canal](#) and [Gaza](#) raising further concerns that the world's most powerful country is seriously entertaining territorial expansion.

Trump's motivations—whether a trade tactic against Canada, securing greater military rights in Greenland, or other reasons—remain unclear. Still, Washington's expansionist policy pivot coincides with [fast-moving negotiations](#) with Russia to try to end the war in Ukraine, likely by ceding land to Moscow.

Meanwhile, Israel is considering its own border consolidation, including [potentially permanent expulsions of Palestinians](#) in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem, and [formalizing its annexation](#) of Syria's Golan Heights. Once dismissed as political theater, Trump's actions now seem part of broader efforts to reshape the discourse on borders, risking ushering in an unpredictable era of renewed territorial conflicts.

Following World War II, the international community [largely resisted](#) border changes, [even in the context of decolonization](#), in fear of spreading instability, secession, and conquest. The [1975 Helsinki Accords](#), in turn, cemented Europe's postwar borders, discouraging violent changes while allowing for peaceful and mutually agreed adjustments.

Optimists hoped that this model would hold after the Cold War. Germany's [reunification in 1990](#) was followed by Czechoslovakia's [amicable split in 1992](#), and Western territorial disputes had by then been reduced to legal battles, as part of a multilateral, institutional approach to conflict resolution that was expected to spread into Eastern Europe and beyond.

However, [territorial disputes](#) erupted in the newly independent states emerging from former communist Europe, lacking clear paths for resolution. In the former Soviet Union, Russian-backed separatists in [Moldova](#) and [Georgia](#) kept conflicts unresolved. The U.S. and NATO [involvement in the former Yugoslavia](#) brought [uneasy peace](#) until [Western backing](#) of Kosovo's 2008 independence [deepened instability](#) and [divided allies](#). Similarly, Western-supported independence efforts in [Eritrea](#) (1993) and [South Sudan](#) (2011) led to prolonged violence, [while other secessionist](#) and annexation movements continued to test the West's commitment to managing territorial integrity globally.

Despite these challenges, the U.S.-led efforts to uphold the status quo mostly held until 2022, when Russia launched the largest war of territorial expansion in Europe since World War II. While Western powers have given [billions in military and economic aid](#) to Ukraine and prevented Russia from taking Kyiv, they were unable to prevent Russia's incursion as it unfolded on NATO's doorstep. The exposed limits of Western deterrence have since shaken confidence in the permanence of established borders.

If a new era of territorial changes has arrived, Trump seems keen to normalize it and position the U.S. as its main beneficiary. Even increasing de facto control over Greenland or the strategically important Panama Canal without full annexation—while negotiating border changes elsewhere—exposes the weakness of certain borders worldwide and allows the U.S. to assert dominance in a changing world order.

In his first term, Trump [hinted at recognizing Crimea](#), seized from Ukraine by Russia in 2014, and appears to accept that Ukraine will not return to its pre-2022 or even [pre-2014 borders](#). On [February 18, 2025](#), U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov convened in Saudi Arabia for Ukraine peace talks, excluding Kyiv and European allies from these discussions.

Keeping [U.S. commitments to Ukraine vague](#) creates room for Trump to reduce

support, but what does he want? Cutting costs, positioning the U.S. as a peacemaker, calming international markets, and potentially securing access to Ukrainian resources are among the possibilities. However, crafting a deal that looks like a win for U.S. foreign policy will be difficult, making the perception of Washington's own territorial expansion key.

While increasing control over Canada seems unlikely, Moscow is "[closely watching](#)" Trump's remarks about Greenland. After a [secret attempt by the U.S.](#) to buy Greenland in 1946, Trump's open proposal carries some weight. Russian officials and media [have floated the idea of dividing Greenland](#) equally, though more seriously, they believe Washington is [pressuring Denmark for greater military access](#). Proposals for agreements like a [Compact of Free Association](#) with Greenland after its potential [independence from Denmark](#) would likely provoke strong reactions from [Russia](#) and [China](#), given their growing Arctic military presence. Moscow's resistance may be softened by concessions in Ukraine, though this remains uncertain.

Washington's openness to bilateral territorial adjustments, bypassing multilateral arbitration, will still require Ukraine's consent and consideration of Greenlanders' (or any other territory's) wishes. Still, any territorial agreement between Russia and the U.S. could influence Israel's territorial ambitions related to Gaza and [Syria](#), after the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's government in [December 2024](#).

[In 2019](#), Trump recognized Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights, a strategically important Syrian region under Israeli control since the 1967 Six-Day War. His decision, which the subsequent Biden administration [upheld](#), set a precedent for U.S. acknowledgment of Israeli territorial claims. After Assad's government collapsed, [Israeli forces quickly entered](#) the UN-designated buffer zone to strengthen control, while the Israeli government [announced plans](#) to double its population there.

The Golan Heights provides Israel with a [strategic, elevated military position](#), [critical freshwater reserves](#), and other [natural resources](#). With Syria's government collapse and Damascus no longer a major threat, Israel faces little opposition to reinforcing its hold and potentially expelling the UN in the process. Strengthening its control could also allow Israel to frame its current military operations as a victory, coupled with the [weakening of "Iran's proxy network."](#)

Despite Assad's fall, [Russia seeks to maintain some military presence in Syria](#), potentially restraining partners from countering Israeli moves in the Golan Heights while using its [influence over Hamas](#) in Gaza to manage tensions. By deepening cooperation with Israel—closely tied to Trump—Moscow may hope to secure concessions in Ukraine. On February 24, 2025, Israel [was one of 18 countries](#), including the U.S., to vote against a UN resolution condemning Russia as an aggressor for its actions in Ukraine.

Trump's unwavering support for Israel strengthens its position and pressures regional countries to align. Jordan, [which relies on water from the Golan Heights](#), will likely be compelled to accept Israeli actions, a dynamic that also extends to Gaza. [On February 11, 2025](#), King Abdullah II of Jordan met with Trump to discuss the resettlement of Palestinians from Gaza after Trump proposed their relocation. The King, [wary of Jordan's past instability with Palestinian refugees](#), firmly rejected Trump's proposal for large-scale Palestinian resettlement. However, his offer to [immediately take in 2,000 injured children](#) was a tacit acknowledgment of the feasibility of limited relocation, inadvertently lending a degree of credibility to Trump's larger proposal.

The timeline for these deals remains unclear, but agreements with Russia and Israel could reshape global border norms and trigger uncontrollable consequences as the U.S. withdraws from enforcing territorial integrity. Both Russia and Israel would likely seek further gains.

Beyond Israeli actions, Syria is contending with [Turkish control in the north](#) and [Kurdish independence](#) movements. Kurdish independence aspirations extend into [Iraq](#), [Iran](#), and [Turkey](#), directly clashing with those countries, while Turkey's ambitions of a "[greater Turkey](#)" include expansive control over [Cyprus](#) and the [Aegean Islands](#).

In Africa, Sudan faces territorial disagreements with both [South Sudan](#) and [Ethiopia](#), whereas Ethiopia has longstanding disputes with [Eritrea](#) and [Somalia](#). Somalia's deepening internal divisions meanwhile [threaten to further fragment the country](#).

Additionally, the decades-long conflict between Morocco and the Algeria-backed Western Sahara reignited [in 2020](#). During the final weeks of Trump's first term, the U.S. became the first country to recognize Western Sahara [as part of Morocco](#)

in exchange for Morocco's recognition of Israel in December 2020. Yet here, Trump appears to have paved the way for a new direction, with [Israel](#) recognizing Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara in 2023 and [France](#) following in 2024. [Dozens of other countries have since offered increasing support](#) for Morocco's position while withholding full endorsement.

Regardless of whether the U.S. was simply ahead of the curve in Morocco, dangerous escalation looms elsewhere. China, observing Russia's potential acquisitions in Ukraine, has [numerous territorial disputes](#) it could escalate, [a traditional part of its geopolitical strategy](#). Tensions over Taiwan and the South China Sea, in particular, could lead to clashes with the U.S. and its allies. China and India [continue to contest](#) their Himalayan border, [despite recent de-escalation](#), while India and Pakistan remain locked in their [clash over Kashmir](#), with the nuclear threat heightening the stakes.

Closer to home, tensions along the [Belize-Guatemala](#) border also carry the risk of escalation. And, [since 2023](#), Venezuela's growing claims to Guyana's Essequibo region, 70 percent of Guyana's territory, have marked a significant shift in the Americas. An outbreak of violence could exacerbate the migrant crisis on the U.S. southern border, testing whether American borders are flexible and strong enough to handle added pressures.

Despite efforts to defend border integrity, colonial-era boundaries, long-established grievances, and sudden state collapses after the end of the Cold War have challenged territorial stability, with the West largely attempting to maintain order. Trump's strategy suggests that global territorial management is not worth the effort, with his administration instead focusing on strengthening borders at home while exploiting vulnerabilities abroad. Changes in Ukraine and Israel may not occur overnight, but years of groundwork, coupled with ongoing deliberations, could accelerate the process and potentially include U.S. territorial expansion.

Whether other countries or future administrations will accept these moves is uncertain. However, if Washington sets a new standard, it will prompt other nations to pursue territorial changes more openly, inviting ethnic cleansing and even genocides. Washington's ability to control this dynamic is unproven, as is its response to emerging foreign disputes and [potential internal secession attempts](#). While deals with Russia and Israel over territory may grant the White House

political breathing room, what follows is anyone's guess.

By John P. Ruehl

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Exploring Ancient Understandings Of Meteorites In Archaic Societies



*Andrew Califf -
Independent
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02-25-2025 ~ Five times a day, approximately one-fourth of the world's population turns toward Mecca to bow their heads in prayer. The Kaaba at the center of this global genuflection has a cornerstone that some [speculate](#) is a meteor.

Meteoritic artifacts appear as early as the dawn of Egypt's Early Dynastic Period, approximately 4,500 years ago. Archaeological teams in the 1920s reported that [beads](#) from the Gerzeh cemetery in northern Egypt had very high concentrations of nickel, typical of meteoritic iron. These are the earliest analyzed artifacts, and modern [metal testing](#) technologies mean that chemists can now identify and catalog the presence of meteoritic iron in archaeological collections across Eurasia. Since 2013, this has led to many discoveries reframing the prominence of extraterrestrial resources in the archaeological record, including identifying that King Tutankhamun's dagger was crafted [from a meteor](#).

Experts [believe](#) this opulent weapon was a gift to the boy king's grandfather Amenhotep III around 1300 BCE, from the king of the Mitanni region, based on the [Amarna tablets](#). This high-status gift is one of the many ways meteoritic iron was revered by ancient civilizations. One of the earliest [Egyptian hieroglyphics](#) for iron seems to be derived from a longer phrase translating to: "[iron from the sky](#)."

This word has cosmological connotations associated with the Egyptian belief that the sky was an [iron pot or tub](#) filled with water, and bits of it fell to the Earth in the form of meteorites.

"We have evidence for the idea that the sky was a dome made of iron in a few different civilizations," explains Victoria Almansa-Villatoro, the Egyptologist who [analyzed](#) the hieroglyphic for iron (and sky), during an interview. "If all of these civilizations had this idea and they are so spread apart, it is possible that the idea goes way back in time, maybe before writing was invented."

Almansa-Villatoro emphasizes tracing any common meanings or beliefs linking such cultures is purely speculation. Contemporaneously to the Mitanni, it is believed the Hittites used meteoritic iron by 3,000 to 2,000 BCE as one [iron dagger](#) excavated in Alaca Höyük in modern-day Turkey was made from a meteor and dated to 2,500 BCE. [Iron pendants](#) from Umm el-Marra in Syria and an iron axe from Ugarit in Lebanon are other key examples of hammered meteoritic iron.

The process of working with meteoritic iron is much simpler than having to reduce the impurities out of terrestrial iron ore (because meteoritic iron is already a metal). All that needs to be done is hammering the material. This key difference is why meteoritic iron [appears well before](#) terrestrial iron and even before the beginning of the Bronze Age, which varies by region but is

approximately from 3,000 to 1,200 BCE.

The Gerzeh beads and King Tutankhamun's dagger were hammered cold or hot, similar to early gold and copper processing. Smelting out impurities from terrestrial iron demarcates the start of the Iron Age because Bronze Age furnaces were not hot enough for such a complex process. The dawn of this development is between 1,200 and 600 BCE depending on the region. How early metallurgists started working with iron ore is still being actively explored by experts. Even though the melting of copper is much simpler than iron production, it may have played a role in the development of iron reduction.

"Copper slags have a lot of iron oxide, and if your furnace reduces too much you will get a small amount of iron in your slag," explains geochemist and metallurgist Albert Jambon, Sorbonne University, during an interview. "Maybe the first people were working with slags, but to go from slag to an ore, I just don't know."

Slag is the waste from metal processing, and it is a good and readily available source of data in the archaeological record. Jambon devised a chemical strategy for identifying meteoritic iron by studying the ratios of nickel to iron and copper in artifacts. It seems that all the iron artifacts from the Bronze Age came from outer space, but research published in 2025 identified that [three of 26 iron artifacts](#) were meteoritic. These artifacts were found in an early Iron Age cemetery of the Lusatian culture in modern-day Poland. Oddly, these artifacts were not found with any wealthy implements in what seemed like graves of "commoners," a stark contrast to how meteoritic iron was valued during earlier historic periods.

Even though approximately [17,000 meteors weighing more than 50 grams](#) hit Earth each year, most are made of stone. Only about 4 percent are composed of iron alloys with abnormal nickel content that people can use. These materials became a rare commodity for ancient people, who began valuing this easy-made iron above gold. [Cuneiform tablets](#) found at the Old Assyrian Colonial site of Kültepe-Kanesh in Turkey from approximately 4,000 years ago refer to a "sky metal" that cost as much as 40 times the price of silver. Silver was the most valuable common precious metal in the region at the time.

Assur, the capital of the Old Assyrian city-state, felt that the meteoritic iron needed to be taxed, which makes Jan Gerrit Dercksen of Leiden University think

that it was common enough to be included in the system of trade tariffs. In Anatolia, not every merchant could afford to trade meteoritic iron, and it seems that groups of merchants combined their funds to buy this sky metal in bulk according to Dercksen.

There was a smaller source of meteoritic iron coming from the East into Assur, but it is difficult to identify where the trade originated. Jambon has struggled to identify more meteoritic iron artifacts farther East, but it has been difficult to obtain and test artifacts from Turkey. As for Iran, there are very [few iron artifacts](#) and they don't appear well into the Iron Age.

This as well as the context in which most Bronze Age meteoritic iron was found suggests that its rarity in part made it a highly valued commodity. This changed with the Iron Age, while meteoritic iron remained rare, terrestrial iron became more common and the early Iron Age cemetery site in Poland is the only identified site where meteoritic iron was found alongside terrestrial iron. It is unclear how much meteoritic iron was used as the number of iron artifacts exploded in the archaeological record.

“There are two possibilities: either there was so little meteoritic iron [artifacts] that it looks like there was no meteoritic iron or the second possibility [is], the price of iron sank so much cheaper than copper,” explains Jambon. “People didn't care anymore about meteoritic iron because iron was so common it was no longer fashionable.”

The Sky is Falling

There is evidence globally that meteors have carried importance across millennia, including the Western Hemisphere. Archaeologists in Arizona found the [Winona meteorite](#) inset in what was assumed to be a ritual cyst in a pre-Columbian settlement. The Clackamas tribe in Oregon have a rich oral tradition and a range of ceremonies surrounding the [Willamette meteor](#), the largest meteor found in North America. Just like the ancient Egyptians, the Hopewell tribe made [beads](#) out of meteoritic iron brought from more than [400 miles away](#) as well as adzes and earpools.

In the 1500s, Indigenous guides brought Spanish soldiers to a field of at least 26 impact craters 500 miles north of Buenos Aires that they called Piguem Nonraltá. The Spanish translated this to [Campo del Cielo](#)—“[field of the sky](#).” The Spanish

soldiers claimed they saw a huge slab of iron but couldn't believe the local stories that it had fallen from the sky.

The meteor shower occurred approximately 4,500 years ago and was recorded by the local cultures as a great [catastrophe](#). Spanish records indicate that the Indigenous tribes made weapons from the iron, but none have been preserved or identified. This field is home to some of the world's largest meteorite fragments including the 30-ton Gancedo fragment found in 2016.

A meteorite currently in the Academy of Sciences of Munich struck Zanzibar in the middle of the 19th century only to be revered by the Wanika tribe until a Maasai cattle raid made them lose respect for it. They promptly sold it to German missionaries.

Prehistoric stone tools also developed a type of lore as good luck charms in different periods and regions due to different cultic traditions largely associated with cosmological concepts.

Tuvan reindeer herders in northern Mongolia continue to collect prehistoric stone tools for good luck and call them "sky stones." Obsidian and flint tools of the Neolithic and Paleolithic in both classical Greek and Roman periods were called "[lightning stones](#)" because they looked like weapons and were associated with the lightning bolt weapons of Zeus. It was recorded as late as the 20th century in Italy that Neolithic flints were treated as amulets to protect against lightning and natural disasters.

It is speculated that people didn't associate these tools or lightning stones as man-made from an earlier period. Scholar Christopher A. Faraone [writes](#) that there is "no evidence that the Greeks or Romans realized that these axe-heads were manufactured by previous stone-age cultures and indeed the inclusion of them in [natural history and geology books] confirms... that they were believed to be 'natural' stones which, like amber, jet or coral, had special protective powers."

The historical depth and meaningful associations people have historically placed on meteoritic iron are more fully illustrated by the tale of a [1,000-year-old Buddha statue](#), made by the Bon culture in Tibet. A Nazi expedition looted the statue weighing just more than 10 kilograms between 1938 and 1939 not knowing that it was made out of [meteoritic iron](#).

Indiana Jones wasn't there to rescue the statue, and it disappeared for decades. The statue reappeared in the hands of a private collector, who collaborated with researchers and determined its extraterrestrial composition and landing spot on Earth. They determined it came from the Chinga meteor which landed 10,000 to 20,000 years ago in southern Siberia, likely traveling thousands of kilometers in its journey to Tibet. While the space-born Buddha is one of the most unique and intricate objects crafted from a meteor, the oldest meteoritic artifacts found east of the Levant are [weapons](#) from China's Shang Dynasty, dating to 1,400 BCE. [A knife and a pole-mounted dagger-axe](#) called *ge* from 900-800 BCE were also made from meteoritic iron.

Baetyls

Meteors are part of many myths and stories around the globe, but one of the most interesting correlations between meteors and sacred sites is found in southwest Eurasia and the Mediterranean region. Baetyls are an ancient tradition of using sacred stones thought to be meteorites or based on meteorites. The etymological origin of the word translates to "house of god."

Thought to originally refer to open-air sites of worship from the original Semitic term, depictions across cultures and civilizations, however, all show hewn stones at the center of god's house that some speculate are meteorites. The word baetyl itself is now used to refer to these revered stones.

In Agia Eirini, Cyprus, more than [2,000 terracotta figurines](#) were found surrounding and facing a cultic stone on an altar. This miniature terracotta army was surrounding a round-shaped small boulder that appears contextually to have been treated as a sacred baetyl.

Baetyls [were known to be](#) in the Phoenician cities of Byblos and Tyre and were adopted by Greek tradition in Delphi at the Temple of Apollo and the Needle of Aphrodite in Paphos. The origin of the baetyl at Tyre may be related to accounts from the Phoenician writer, Sanchuniathon, that the goddess Astarte found a stone fallen from the sky, which she took to Tyre to worship in a shrine.

It is even speculated that the cultic practices around meteors played a role in the founding of Rome. Rome had a sacred black stone and shrine like a baetyl called the [Lapis Niger](#), which was believed to have been derived from preexisting cultic worship practices. According to the Roman Grammarian and teacher Marcus

Verrius Flaccus, the *Lapis Niger* marks a [spot of ill omen](#) and was intended to be the mythical founder Romulus's burial spot but was, in fact, not used as such.

Excavations under Giacomo Boni at the Roman Forum in 1899 uncovered what was dubbed the *Lapis Niger* and the tomb of Romulus. This was something of a misnomer because it is unclear whether he actually found this site or if the accounts were accurate in the first place.

The [archaeological journal volume](#) about his excavations from 1903 suggested that the polished black stone on the *Lapis Niger* that Flaccus saw could have been a meteorite, but the excavations from 1899 only seemed to have uncovered copies influenced by the *Lapis Niger*. Etruscan [grave markers](#) from a major necropolis in Cerveteri have similar black stones to that of the *Lapis Niger*.

There are several [textual references](#) to sacred stones from the sky in Greco-Roman sources that experts believe are meteor fragments. The religious historian Mircea Eliade even [asserted](#) that important holy sites, including the Palladion of Troy, the Artemis of Ephesus, and the Cone of Elagabalus in Emesa, were actually based on meteorites.

There is no physical evidence supporting the origin stories of these shrines and the historical speculations surrounding them—no excavated or identified baetyl was a meteor. Other descriptions of baetyls are regularly just rock or even simply mounds of earth. The same stands true for the Egyptian Benben stone—a black pyramidal stone thought to either be on top of a pyramid or influence the pyramids in ancient Egypt.

Benben has become a generic term for the top cornerstone of a pyramid or obelisk, but it is derived from a revered one mentioned repeatedly in Egyptian texts. The [original](#) was venerated at the “Mansion of the Phoenix” within the Great Sun Temple of Heliopolis but likely predates the sun cult of Ra. It is [linked](#) to the creation story of Atum, one of the oldest Egyptian deities. The Benben is either the hill he rises out of the waters from or what he falls out of the sky on (remember the Egyptian sky being an iron tub of water). But Atum is credited with and linked to many cosmological symbols.

Just like the Black Stone of the Kaaba in Mecca, it is still not scientifically conclusive whether or not any revered stones recorded in historical documents are meteors. It is speculated there are cultic, pre-Abrahamic items of worship

inside the Kaaba Similarly, any potential meteor worship in the Greco-Roman pantheons could have been derived from earlier traditions, like how Atum's Benben predated the Sun God Ra.

Although the Black Stone, or *al-Hajar al-Aswad* in Arabic, makes appearances during the lifetime of Abraham and Muhammad, it supposedly fell to Earth when Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden. It landed where they were to build the first temple, and it was placed into the Kaaba by the Prophet Muhammad in 605 CE. According to [tradition](#), the Black Stone was originally white but turned black as it absorbed the sin of the hajis who touched it at Mecca. Islamic tradition is the only source of information on the origin of *al-Hajar al-Aswad*.

In the oldest known epic poem from Mesopotamia, the titular protagonist Gilgamesh [dreams](#) of a meteor landing outside the ancient city of Uruk that he is unable to move. This dream has prophetic meaning for the rest of the epic, putting meteors front and center in one of the oldest pieces of literature.

Philosophers of the Greco-Roman period were some of the first known to record rocks falling from the sky. Aristotle, Plutarch, and Pliny the Elder, to name a few, were the first to record a meteor fall in Turkey around either 467 or 466 BC. Meanwhile, the community of European scientists debated the existence of meteors until the early 19th century; a [meteor shower](#) in France in 1803 ended the debate.

The uncertainty of textual references can hopefully be proved by the archaeological record. Jambon first started using his chemical analysis looking for meteoritic iron in 2010 after purchasing an XRF instrument. Despite the many obstacles in obtaining old artifacts from around Eurasia, he continues to shine a light on ancient metallurgical technologies.

By Andrew Califf

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Sri Lanka's New Government Struggles To Increase Public Investment Amid IMF Constraints



02-26-2025 ~ *The maiden budget by Sri Lanka's new government reflects the limitations of austerity and the need to reinstall confidence in ideas of investment-led growth and industrialisation.*

On 17 February 2025, Sri Lanka's Anura Kumara Dissanayake delivered his maiden budget speech. Dissanayake, who is both president and finance minister, stated that the budget was based on principles of productive growth, active public engagement, and equitable distribution.

This much-anticipated budget is the first since the country held presidential and parliamentary elections in late 2024 during which voters rejected the mainstream ruling parties and placed their hopes in National People's Power (NPP). The latter is a relatively new political formation consisting of various civil society groups and anchored by its core party the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

While Sri Lanka has elected a new president and government, its policy space remains restricted by its 17th support package from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which was entered into by the preceding government. In a panel discussion held a few days after his budget speech, Dissanayake conceded, 'Our economy is running on conditions. There is no economic independence or sovereignty - it is under probation and being monitored'. This is a stark admission from Dissanayake, whose government has so far backed down from its campaign promise of renegotiating the unfavourable debt restructuring agreement brokered

by the IMF.

The NPP government's budget proposals remain committed to a path of fiscal consolidation. This is evidenced by the fact that total government revenue is projected to increase by 23% (mainly through indirect taxes), while government expenditure will increase at a much lower rate of 13%. Despite this, there is an anticipated budget deficit of 6.7% of GDP, well above the IMF's recommended target of 5.2% for the country. This is reflective of the political infeasibility of the IMF's ambitious and often brutal austerity programmes.

One of the primary reasons for the government missing the IMF's deficit target appears to be the resumption of public capital investment. The latter was previously gutted under the preceding administration led by the centre-right Ranil Wickremesinghe. Dissanayake's government aims to increase public investment from 13% of government expenditure in 2024 to 18% in 2025. This will be especially necessary if the NPP is to implement any of its campaign promises, let alone reach its growth target of 5%.

The reality is that most economists in Sri Lanka take budget proposals with a fistful of salt, especially when formulated in the context of IMF guardrails. If under pressure to meet the IMF's revenue targets, public investment will be the first line of expenditure to be slashed. Meanwhile, the actual lion's share of government spending will continue to go towards interest payments that will make up 41% of total expenditure in 2025.

Sri Lanka had one of the highest interest burdens in the world before defaulting on its external debt in 2022. This was mainly due to high-interest debts owed to private creditors such as BlackRock and Ashmore. While the G20 has a [Common Framework](#) for restructuring the debts of low-income countries, there is no such framework for middle-income countries like Sri Lanka. According to the IMF's own projections, the debt restructuring deal that they have brokered for the country will see it carrying a public debt-to-GDP burden of around 95% in 2032.

Debt Traps and Investment Gaps

Sri Lanka's dilemma reflects broader trends in the Global South. A 2023 United Nations (UN) study titled [A World of Debt](#) found that developing countries owed a collective 29 trillion US dollars in public debt. Though this debt is a fraction of that owed by industrialised countries, developing-country debt is growing twice

as fast and is borrowed at interest rates that are significantly higher. In fact, research by the non-profit ONE Campaign [points out](#) that the Global South now spends more in debt payments than it receives in grants and loans.

The other side of this debt trap is the fact that many of the countries in the Global South are cursed with low growth rates due to a lack of investment. The UN estimates that there is a 4 trillion US dollar investment gap just for developing countries to meet the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) by 2030. This provoked UN Secretary-General António Guterres to call for a “surge in investment” back in April 2024.

The problem is that such investment is simply not forthcoming in the current international economic order dominated by the Global North and the Bretton Woods institutions. Since the start of the Third Great Depression (triggered by the 2007 financial crisis in the US), foreign direct investment (FDI) has simply not kept pace with GDP and trade growth. Meanwhile, what little FDI remains is predominantly in the service sector - according to UN Trade and Development, services accounted for [81% of new foreign investment projects](#) between 2020 and 2023.

In the meantime, the existing multilateral financing framework is not doing its job - or perhaps it is doing it too well. Institutions like the World Bank are dominated by the United States, and their lending patterns often come attached to policy conditions. The latter frequently violate economic sovereignty and discourage the kinds of state-led economic interventions needed to drive structural transformation in the Global South. As a result, these institutions exist to maintain international inequality that stems from the division of labour between the Global North and Global South.

Making Way for the New

In Sri Lanka, the right wing is gloating over the conservative approach of the new budget proposals. Harsha de Silva, a Member of Parliament representing the centre-right opposition party Samagi Jana Balawegaya, called the budget a ‘victory’ as it signalled continuity with the neoliberal reform project. Meanwhile, Murtaza Jafferjee, a Sri Lankan stockbroker and chairman of a libertarian think tank affiliated with the neoliberal [Atlas Network](#) - has called the budget ‘market-oriented and pro-business’.

These comments, perhaps intended to disorient and demoralise those who expected a more radical change under the NPP government, are not entirely false. They speak to a much larger problem faced by governments which promise a break from the drudgery of austerity and then find themselves rendered immobile by the system. This is partly political, reflecting a failure to educate and mobilise the masses on the roots of the crisis. But it is also theoretical, reflecting a lack of new ideas or, at the very least, a lack of confidence in alternative approaches.

The NPP government's attempt to raise the share of public investment in government expenditure, even within the context of the IMF straitjacket, reflects a basic awareness that investment is needed to grow out of the debt trap and meaningfully address social issues. Indeed, there is compelling [evidence](#) of a high correlation between GDP growth and investment in fixed capital (that is, assets such as infrastructure and machinery that have a bearing on the real economy).

Investment in the manufacturing sector is key to technological upgrading, upskilling labour, and unlocking rapid growth in the Global South. In fact, data from the UN Industrial Development Organisation [shows that](#) 64% of growth episodes in the last fifty years were fuelled by the rapid development of the manufacturing sector. It is hard to imagine any meaningful and integrated development without manufacturing.

This is why there appears to be a renewed push for industrialisation across many countries in the Global South - from President Lula da Silva's New Industry Brazil (Nova Indústria Brasil/NIB) programme to the Made in China 2025 programme. It is unlikely that any government in Sri Lanka can formulate and implement such cohesive plans without confronting the IMF and private creditors which have severely restricted the country's economic sovereignty.

The drive towards industrialisation is intimately tied to the history of national liberation struggles in the Global South, which sought to forge an independent path towards modernisation. In 1956, the socialist William de Silva articulated this aspiration for sovereign modernisation in his policy statement as the industries minister in Sri Lanka's first nationalist government:

'In our country, industry has hitherto been accorded the treatment generally meted out to an unwanted child. The imperialist-imposed international division of labour, whereby the colonial countries remained as agricultural appendages, was regarded... as an absolute law of nature. But like all other historical phenomena,

this old division of labour is decaying and making way for the new’.

By Shiran Illanperuma

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