We are at a conjuncture in world history where everything is at stake. UN reports on climate crisis, biodiversity loss, species extinction and everyday lived experiences of a world in crisis haunt our state of being. It seems like a great unravelling has begun, posing ostensibly insurmountable challenges. The power of social analysis, particularly critical and Marxist political economy analysis, is crucial to assist in explaining these realities and identifying possibilities for emancipatory transformation. In this regard, macro-analysis of big structures and processes related to capitalism and its progeny, imperialism, have to be front and centre in how we understand the contemporary world.

This volume has drawn on critical and Marxist analytical approaches to make sense of the territorial and economic logics of contemporary imperialism. A geopolitics of North versus South, embodied in a US-led bloc versus a China-led BRICS bloc, is one perception of our world. Underlying this are various assumptions about power, politics, geography and economics. At one level, the US is seen as an unchanging and structurally invincible colossus. It is the prime capitalist state, setting standards for capitalist civilisation and leading the contemporary world order. At another level, BRICS is vaunted as ‘anti-imperialist’, an attempt at renewing post-Bandung ‘South-South solidarity’ and the harbinger of an alternative for the peripheries of capitalism. This volume unsettles the simple geopolitical perceptions, images and rhetoric at work. It is critical in going beyond the accepted common sense of world order.
REMEMBERING ROSA LUXEMBURG

A crucial intellectual resource informing, either directly or indirectly, the intellectual orientation of this volume has been Rosa Luxemburg’s original and pioneering work on imperialism. Luxemburg’s brilliant mind was brought to an abrupt halt on 15 January 1919. She was murdered by right-wing shock troops under instruction from key members of the Social Democratic government led by Friedrich Ebert. This injustice has not been reckoned with by the Social Democratic Party of Germany. However, Luxemburg’s intellectual contribution to Marxist thought and her classic *Accumulation of Capital* (1913) resonates into the present. It provides fertile and valuable resources for thinking through the form and practice of imperialism today. While Luxemburg was thinking in a different context, her attempts to explain the economic basis of imperialism and colonialism are crucial for an understanding of where we are today. While formal colonialism might have ended, imperial control of the peripheries of capitalism continues.

Revisiting Luxemburg’s work and the fluorescence of fresh thinking derived from it assist in situating various contemporary dynamics of capitalism. While appreciating her limits, many critical thinkers, theorists and Marxists – beyond the scope of this volume – are using Luxemburg as a crucial starting point to understand the restructuring of global capitalism, militarism, ecological relations linked to expropriating what she termed the ‘natural economy’, uneven development, commodification and de-commodification, the boomerang effect of violence and the future of a terminally ill capitalism. Unearthing and reworking several of her critical historical materialist concepts are crucial for a thinking Marxism. This volume has drawn on Luxemburg as a premise or a point of departure from which to think about where we are in the contemporary world. She has impacted on contributors in this volume, some more than others, with regard to how we think about the structural divide between core/periphery, North/South and US versus the rest, that shape and condition our life world.

What the volume makes clear is that carbon extraction and control is centred in the global North, but that there are also vast amounts of carbon-based resources controlled by state corporations in the global South, in countries such as Russia, China, India and Brazil. In the context of climate change this is a crucial challenge. At the same time, water resources are stressed on a planetary scale. While water stress is exacerbated by climate change this essential resource for reproducing human and non-human life is also being commodified and tied into particular geo-economic circuits. In a country like drought-prone South Africa water conflicts are already manifesting and poised to get worse. If the imperatives of global
carbon-based extraction, together with water commodification, prevail in this moment of climate-driven systemic crisis, we are heading for civilisational collapse. In this regard, Luxemburg was prescient about what could happen if capitalist accumulation engulfed the entire world. Neither BRICS nor non-BRICS countries are grappling with this challenge; rather, many are causing and contributing to the problems underpinning the trajectory of civilisational collapse.

THE AGE OF IMPERIAL CHAOS

US imperial reach, power and presence in the world is at a turning point. Financialised over-accumulation buttressed by US power is an instability wired into the circuitry of global capitalism. The roller coaster of financial instability is far from over, yet controlling global finance is crucial for the reproduction of US power. The BRICS have not succeeded in breaking this power and providing an alternative. The BRICS bank is embedded in the neoliberal financial architecture shaped and influenced by the US-led bloc. This expresses itself as subimperial relations in one moment of cooperation. On the other hand, Trump's acceleration of climate change and his repositioning of the US to push back the contender roles of Russia and China opens up conflicts with the US-led bloc. Global rivalries, partly muted through global institutions, are also emerging outside these parameters.

At the same time, Trump's belligerence towards Venezuela and Iran is showing dangerous signs of escalating. Open destabilisation of Venezuela and sabre-rattling through positioning geostrategic assets like warships close to Iran expresses both an economic and territorial logic of imperial power. It cranks up the military-industrial complex in the US for military conflict beyond the endless war on terror, which has already cost trillions of dollars, but it also disrupts global oil flows, pushing up the price of oil and benefiting shareholding-based carbon corporations in the US and the global North more generally. Increasing the price of oil also ramifies negatively through a tenuous and globalised food system. China and the other BRICS countries are not able to counter these moves of imperial overreach. In this context, China's overaccumulation challenges lock it more deeply into managing global capitalism on US terms. As has been analysed in this volume, China has skewed economic patterns in some BRICS countries for certain primary commodities (such as agricultural produce from Brazil) while at the same time Chinese overproduction of steel has impacted negatively on the manufacturing capacities of countries like South Africa. The BRICS as a bloc of countries is being pulled apart by its underlying and unequal economic dynamics, but also by the rise of extreme right-wing
forces in some partner countries. It is too early to tell how this will deepen and exacerbate intra-BRICS rivalries.

In addition, complex and interconnected systemic contradictions such as climate change and growing water crises are not taken seriously within the US-led bloc. While Trump cranks up carbon extraction and pushes back against multilateral responses to climate change, its real impacts are registering in the world with extreme weather changes. Climate shocks are costing lives and money. This challenge is crossing borders. BRICS countries’ investment strategies are not talking to this challenge and in the case of water resources rivalries are emerging between, for instance, India and China. Moreover, in Mozambique, which experienced two devastating cyclones (Idai and Kenneth) within six weeks of each other, Brazilian corporations are investing heavily in carbon (coal and gas) extraction and export-led agriculture.

US-led imperialism has facilitated the uneven geographic expansion of capitalism. At the same time, it has been responsible for moving crises around through spatial fixes, remaking North–South relations to ensure accumulation while dispossessing life, advancing wars and exacerbating growing global rivalry. A world of imperial chaos is in the making: US-led global capitalism is plunging the world into further barbarism, a term used by Luxemburg to characterise the capitalist world of her time. Greater violence and supremacist domination take us further away from building an emancipatory world and civilisation.

RESISTANCE AND THE FUTURE

Similar to Luxemburg, who identified various forms of resistance against imperial and colonial expansion, all the contributors in this volume identify modes and forms of resistance – mainly from below. The BRICS in the analysis of this volume is not a harbinger of an emancipatory politics and future. Its contradictions, limits and incoherence is laid bare. Some authors in the volume assess the BRICS as a sideshow for China, others reduce this configuration to subimperial relations, while others underline the incapacity of the BRICS to deal with its own contradictions. What is exciting in some of the contributions is the extension of analysis beyond the BRICS as a bloc. The optic of some contributions points to struggles from below within BRICS countries, against transnational corporations, mass defensive strikes by workers and various forms of cultural critique. Resistance to expanded reproduction and to accumulation through dispossessing life might be beneath the
surface, in most instances, but is reassuringly alive and well, albeit pitched against an increasingly supremacist imperial order.

Finally, sitting at the centre of this volume is a crucial debate about the future of internationalism. One chapter reflects critically on the World Social Forum and the need for a new vessel of struggle. Another makes the call for a new Workers and Peoples International. These are not calls to repeat history or merely bring back an authoritarian left politics. There is a search going on in these pages, written by leading Marxist thinkers who want to confront the global scale of capitalist crisis, imperial chaos and worsening global rivalries. Without counter-hegemonic human solidarity and an affirmation of radical universal values, on an international scale, we are faced with a terrifying and bleak world, being made in the image of the new US imperialism.