

*Imperialist Canada*, Todd Gordon, Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2011

### Abstract

In the immediate postwar period, liberal internationalism was the hallmark of Canadian foreign policy. In part this position was intended to protect Canadian sovereignty from the too-close embrace of US Cold-War imperialism. But this multilateral and peacekeeping approach was partly a veneer meant to disguise the fact that Canada was of necessity a close American ally in the fight against communism. This strategy was abandoned by the Canadian state in the late 1990s in favour of a more militaristic and aggressive approach. The dependency-school of Canadian Marxist political economy that flourished from the 1970s argued that Canadian conformity with American foreign policy resulted from the fact that American economic dominance over Canada and lack of a strong national bourgeoisie made it a willing instrument of American foreign policy. Reflecting a challenge by a new school of Marxist political economy, Todd Gordon argues convincingly that Canada is an imperialist entity with its historic roots lying in the dispossession of the indigenous peoples. It is based on its strong national bourgeoisie which is flourishing under neoliberalism. But whether imperialist Canada is independent of the United States is more contestable.

### Keywords

Canada, imperialism, bourgeoisie, dependency, industry, mining, Latin America, military

In October 2010 Canada stood for election for one of the non-permanent seats on the UN Security Council. But it was forced to stand down after it became clear in the second ballot that it would suffer a humiliating defeat. The Conservative Party's foreign minister Lawrence Cannon blamed Canada's rout on its adherence to principle. On the contrary, most of the media agreed with parliamentary critics who attributed the loss to Canada's abandonment of its traditional diplomatic principles of peacekeeping, a balanced approach to the Israeli-Palestinian question, and commitment to environmental sustainability and human rights. The loss of its bid for a seat on the Security Council confirmed the splintering of Canada's post-World-War-II image as a paragon of liberal internationalism.

Since the 1950s successive Canadian governments presented themselves as champions of multilateralism, United Nations peace-keeping and global economic development. This approach served the interests of the Canadian state, affirming its sovereignty while distancing Canada from the most belligerent aspects of the Cold-War politics of its southern neighbour. In stark contrast to the last liberal government under Paul Martin, the Stephen Harper Conservative government appears to have performed a 180-degree turn. Canada enthusiastically enlisted in the American War on Terror, putting its military in the frontlines of combat in the Afghan War, playing an important back-up rôle in the Iraq conflict and lending unqualified diplomatic support to the state of Israel. Moreover it helped the US orchestrate the overthrow of the democratically elected government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide in Haiti. To boot it has defied global public opinion with respect to the gigantic Alberta tar-sands oil-project meant to supply oil to the American market despite its catastrophic environmental impact.

The transformation of Canadian foreign policy, while real, is not as dramatic as it seems. Following World-War II, the Gouzenko spy-scandal in Canada helped to initiate the Cold-War witch-hunts in the United States. Canada became a charter-member of the

American-backed NATO alliance and fought side-by-side with the US in the Korean War. True, the architect of postwar Canadian internationalism, Lester Pearson, expressed misgivings about the Vietnam War and Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau opened the Canadian border to over 100,000 American draft-dodgers and deserters. But it must be borne in mind that Canada was the West's representative on the International Control Commission appointed by the Geneva Conference (1954). As such, it faithfully served as a diplomatic errand-boy for the United States during the war in Indo-China. Moreover, private Canadian business made a killing selling military equipment to the Pentagon. Indeed, Canada's flourishing arms-industry really took off during the war.

On the Left, Canadian dependency on the United States was explained by what was called the Canadian 'new economic political economy'. Basing itself in part on Latin-American dependency-theory, the thinkers of this school asserted that, after 1945, American manufacturing-capital invaded Canada and largely displaced home-grown industries. One of the pioneers of this dependency-school, Kari Levitt argued that the postwar Canadian economy had become a hinterland for the extraction of raw materials and a market for American manufactures.<sup>1</sup> Its manufacturing sector was transformed into a branch-plant of American corporations. The managers of such plants were administrators rather than innovators. Meanwhile they blocked and undermined local entrepreneurship and technological innovation. In the light of this domination by American imperialism, concluded Levitt, Canada was rich because of its vast store of natural resources, but nonetheless it was a dependent semi-colony whose foreign relations served the interests of the United States. The essential political problem of Canada, like the states of Latin America, was national oppression.

The further development of the dependency-school in Canada during the 1970s underlined the historically comprador-nature of the Canadian bourgeoisie. In 'The Canadian Bourgeoisie and its National Consciousness', Daniel Drache argued that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries this bourgeoisie renounced the quest for new markets and industrialisation. Instead it sought inclusion into existing imperial networks based on the extraction of raw materials and the maintenance of control over the indigenous populations of the country.<sup>2</sup> Tom Naylor maintained that from the French through the British period there was a continuous history of such dependency. The creation of the Canadian state in the nineteenth century then provided a framework for merchant and finance-capital that could facilitate further resource-extraction and the development of a branch-plant economy based on American domination.<sup>3</sup>

In *The Canadian Corporate Elite*, Wallace Clement investigated the consequence of this pattern in a study of the structure and social composition of Canadian corporations. Like Naylor he found the Canadian élite specialising in circulation-finance, transport and media while the branch-plant managers – primarily Americans – focused on manufacture. This division of labour provided the basis for a continental alliance in which the Canadian financial and commercial sector was over-developed and the industrial sector stunted.<sup>4</sup>

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1. Levitt 1970.

2. Drache 1970.

3. Naylor 1975.

4. Clement 1975.

From the perspective of the dependency-school, Canada was seen largely as a victim whose economic and political future was dubious.

The dependency-school flourished in the 1970s, but was challenged even then. Steve Moore and Debi Wells argued that Canada was part of an increasingly integrated global imperialism and that its rôle within this order was growing.<sup>5</sup> Since then, attacks on this view have become more incisive. David McNally argued that the dependency-school harped on exchange-relations at the expense of the social relations of production.<sup>6</sup> William K. Carroll pointed to the contradiction inherent in the notion of a rich dependency.<sup>7</sup> Jorge Niosi and Michael Kaufman showed that the national bourgeoisie had regained control of the majority of assets in the national economy and was rapidly expanding overseas.<sup>8</sup> Jerome Klassen lately maintained that Canadian capital dominates its internal market and has created an integrated network of financial and industrial firms.<sup>9</sup>

Todd Gordon's book represents a further critique of the dependency-school based upon an unremitting attack on Canadian foreign policy. He argues that, far from being colonised, Canada today is a major imperialist country. This is especially true with respect to the exploitation of the labour and resources of the global South. At the core of Canada's foreign policy is the goal of fostering the successful expansion of Canadian corporations especially in underdeveloped countries. The government promotes one-sided trade and investment-deals with poor countries, ignores human-rights abuses perpetrated to safeguard Canadian investments, strongly backs IMF structural-adjustment programmes and is spending billions to expand its military to project Canadian power overseas. The goal is to help Canadian business to expand markets and access resources. Although investment has extended to Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia, the great bulk of Canadian capital has flowed to Latin America and the Caribbean. Such foreign investment has been highly remunerative. In 1980 Canadian corporate profits from investments in third-world countries totalled \$3.7 billion, but in 2007 reached \$23.6 billion after tax. Such returns were greater than those earned at home over the same period (pp. 10–11).

Canada's expansion into the global South has been based on the fact that the Canadian market is insufficient. As Thomas D'Acquino and David Stewart-Paterson, former President and Vice-President respectively of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, put it: 'Canada's leading players are all engaged actively in expansion abroad for the simple reason that Canada does not have enough room for them to achieve global scale' (pp. 106–7). In this light, Gordon sees Canada's imperialism in terms of David Harvey's concept of the spatial fix, which for him requires dealing with the problem of the over-accumulation of capital in terms of the geographical displacement of capital from where it was originally generated to more profitable spaces in the third world (p. 32). He genuflects towards Lenin's concept of inter-imperialist rivalry (pp. 51–3) but follows David McNally who places stress on the exploitation of the global South by the global North (p. 26). This perspective has been theorised in a convincing way by Samir Amin who speaks of the major site of class-struggle

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5. Moore and Wells 1975, pp. 19, 29, 33, 89, 93–4.

6. McNally 1981.

7. Carroll 1986, p. 18.

8. Niosi 1978; Kaufman 1984.

9. Klassen 2009, p. 170.

today as focused around an ongoing global rent extracted by the countries of the North from a resource-rich and now industrialised South.<sup>10</sup>

Canada has been a net exporter of capital since 1997 and the total stock of its foreign investment has reached nearly \$515 billion as of 2007. It has the fourth highest ratio of outward direct investment-stock to GDP among G8 countries. Much of Canadian investment still flows to the United States, but an increasing fraction is going to the global South (pp. 173–6). Finance, energy and mining form the bulk of such investments with mining particularly notable. The Canadian mining industry is the largest in the world, carrying on 30 per cent of global investment in this sector (pp. 184–5). Indeed, the author might have done more to outline the comparative advantages which help to explain the success of the Canadian mining industry.

Gordon insists that this imperialism reflects the interests of a powerful Canadian bourgeoisie. According to him Canada has a strong interlocked ruling class. Less than 500 individuals sit on the boards of the top 250 corporations. Moreover, foreign, i.e., American, control over non-financial corporations is lower than it was in 1965 (p. 19). On this basis Gordon mounts a sharp attack on the politics of the dependency-school. According to Gordon the dependency-school's analysis has led to the mistaken view that the Canadian manufacturing and industrial bourgeoisie is weak. As a result, the dependency-school has distracted left-nationalists from the struggle against this home-grown bourgeoisie and its imperialist ambitions. Instead of keeping the spotlight on the struggle against Canadian capitalists exploiting labour at home and abroad, left-nationalists focus on restricting foreign investment in order to protect Canadian sovereignty. In doing so they end up obscuring the class-differences that shape society, misdirect the political energies of workers and create illusions about the Canadian state serving as a progressive force (pp. 16–19). Gordon's critique reflects his view of the need for an independent working-class political perspective free of bourgeois influence.

Gordon meticulously quantifies the imperialist economic reach of the Canadian bourgeoisie into the underdeveloped world. But his statistics, essential as they are, do not convey the full force of his account. It is rather his massive catalogue of the violence and depredations of Canadian corporations in third-world countries that is riveting, especially as they have until now been kept largely hidden. In great detail he exposes the extent of the plundering being carried on by Canadian corporations in the nations of the global South – hyper-exploiting labour, stealing and destroying land, and violently attempting to suppress opposition. Such behaviour has become nearly ubiquitous in the age of neoliberal globalisation, leaving a trail of human-rights violations and ecological devastation in its wake (p. 261).

From a long list of the unscrupulous and rapacious practices by Canadian mining companies supplied by Gordon one can single out the activities of Toronto-based Barrick Gold, the largest gold-producer in the world. The Pascua Lama open-pit mine straddling the Chilean-Argentine border is one its most controversial projects. Based on an investment of \$1.6 billion, the Pascua Lama mine was predicted to yield 775,000 ounces of gold, silver and copper over the next ten years. As part of this development, Barrick intended to relocate major parts of three glaciers. Fears of water-pollution and soil-pollution generated a serious

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10. Amin 2011, pp. 93–5.

backlash among thousands of farmers and other inhabitants of the region. In a show of support by the Canadian state, Prime Minister Harper met with Barrick Mines officials on a state-visit to Chile in July 2007 while ignoring requests for a meeting from local environmentalists. With some modifications, the project was subsequently approved by the Chilean and Argentine governments.

Barrick's interest in the Ancash region of Peru has also led to popular resistance. In April 2007 a regional 48-hour strike demanded that the local government cancel contracts with Barrick and another company. Police arrested 19 protesters while two others died. A year earlier Barrick had refused to raise the wages of miners in Huallapampa, the site of another of its mining operations. Workers blockaded the mine. The company called the police who killed two of the protesters. That same year there were violent clashes between ecologically-minded farmers and the forces of order in La Rioja, Argentina, over Barrick's plans to mine gold on Mount Fammatina whose snowy peaks supply water to the large number of wine-growers of the region. The governor of this province had worked with the former neoliberal president Carlos Menem to secretly modify the tax-code to favour mining interests and was suspended by the local legislature. Following a blockade, Barrick abandoned the site. These instances are only three examples of Barrick's nefarious worldwide operations. Such has been the extent of its ravages that in May 2007 an international day of protest against the company was organised (pp. 210–14).

Columbia's largest oil-pipeline is owned by Oleadcuto Central S.A. whose largest shareholder is Calgary-based Enbridge. Construction and security for the pipeline led to the forced displacement of more than 1,000 peasants in the department of Antioquia. When the peasants sued for compensation they and their lawyer received death-threats. The local manager of OCENSA was reputedly in contact with paramilitaries and the lawyer for the peasants eventually fled the country. This incident was part of a wider wave of dispossession in Antioquia during the 1990s and 2000s which involved the displacement of 200,000 peasants. Threats to the pipeline have led OCENSA to actively cooperate with Colombian paramilitaries and armed forces in notorious and widespread counter-insurgency operations (pp. 226–7).

But Barrick and Enbridge are only two in Gordon's long list of outlaw Canadian-mining and energy-companies which have been exploiting labour and inflicting terrible environmental damage in the global South. The list also includes Corona Goldfields, Greystar Resources, Ascendant Copper, Corriente Resources, Anvil Mining, Goldcorp, Encana, and Talisman. Gordon's litany of the overseas piracy of Canadian corporations and especially its mining corporations amounts to a world-class scandal. But exposing these corporate crimes represents only one facet of Gordon's achievement. The other side is his account of the devastation wrought by Canadian mining, oil and other businesses on the indigenous population of Canada. In a long chapter preceding his account of Canadian imperialism abroad, Gordon shows that the thrust of Canadian imperialism into the global South grew directly out of its colonial-settler conquest of the indigenous peoples of the Canadian hinterland. Canada's imperialist ventures abroad have been prepared by its history as a white colonial-settler state. A domestic imperial project gave Canadian business the financial means to move successfully onto the international stage.

Capitalism in Canada grew under the protection of the Canadian state through the establishment of a legal system protecting private property, the privatisation of land and natural resources, the establishment of borders to control immigration and protect Canadian

business, and the creation of a labour-market. There were hundreds of indigenous nations living on land rich in resources who did not wish to be included in the Canadian state or participate in the projects of private enterprise. But it was these indigenous lands and the labour of both indigenous and immigrant-workers which allowed Canadian business to accumulate capital to the point of being able to expand abroad. As Gordon notes, 'it was on indigenous lands that mines were developed, oil discovered, private farms to feed the growing urban centres established, railways connecting the vast Canadian market laid, roads to transport goods carved out of the landscape and tourist resorts built' (p. 67). In the course of this process the Canadian state and businesses learned important lessons which they have applied in imperialist ventures in foreign lands: subordinate the colonised, preferably by market-mechanisms; use supposedly impartial bureaucratic-administrative methods to deflect and subvert resistance; and ultimately apply naked force when required. It is these techniques perfected at home that are today being applied in foreign lands more often than not against indigenous people.

Gordon takes us on an extended journey into Canada's past to show us how the indigenous people were dispossessed. Dispossession was carried out by outright violence but also by a series of treaties which amounted to little more than a succession of robberies. Moreover where the terms of such one-sided treaties proved inconvenient they were subsequently pushed aside or repudiated. The reserve-system imposed by these agreements was never designed to provide the basis of a viable subsistence-economy but rather to force aboriginal peoples into the labour-market. The imposition of puritan moral reform, the Christian religion and residential schools was meant to undermine the foundations of indigenous culture. The Indian Act and its bureaucratic régime established a permanent guardianship over the reserves which persist to this day.

The further expansion of mining into Northern Canada makes continued access to indigenous land and labour essential to the future of Canadian business. Approximately 1,200 indigenous communities are less than 200 kilometres from mining sites. As a result, environmental concerns and the prospect of further intrusion onto native land are crucial issues (p. 82). The Canadian state, while continuing to posture as a neutral arbiter, in fact strongly sides with the mining corporations while it and the companies hold out the chance of training and employment to the threatened indigenous population which stands in their way. The exploration, development and transport of oil across aboriginal land represents another major source of conflict. But these struggles over mining and gas and oil are only the most prominent in the ongoing conflicts between indigenous people and private industry over timber-rights, fisheries, hydro-electric dams, real-estate development, tourism-projects, highway-construction and ranching.

Lately the Canadian state is playing a major rôle in clearing the way for future capitalist development through the negotiation of comprehensive settlements which are designed to once and for all extinguish aboriginal claims to collective control over land and resources. Such legal processes are important training grounds whose lessons can be applied to assist the penetration of Canadian capital into third-world countries. The author shows how, through its involvement in the IMF and World Bank, by virtue of bilateral free-trade agreements and foreign-investment protection-programmes with underdeveloped countries, and through its foreign-aid and financial programmes, the Canadian state has helped open Latin America to Canadian business. Neoliberal structural-adjustment programmes (rebranded as the 'Poverty Reduction Growth Facility') allow Canadian

investors a more-or-less free hand (pp. 138–70). Efforts to impose human-rights standards on the behaviour of Canadian companies at home and abroad have been stymied by the Canadian state, which has flatly refused to endorse the UN draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (pp. 170–1). Summing up the continuing connection between the techniques of Canada's imperialism abroad and its home-grown colonialism, Gordon argues that

The Canadian empire begins – geographically and historically – in these colonies within Canada's own borders, and proceeds outward from there. In the domestic imperial battleground Canada has faced the challenges of subordinating [aboriginal] nations to its political and economic whim; it has developed a confidence in its right to unduly influence sovereign nations, undermine their cultures and drain them of their wealth. A practiced imperial hand, Canada has learned to be flexible, and rely on a variety of strategies – from the legal realm, to establishing market dependency, to employing force, to proclaiming its humane intentions – to achieve its ends. But the wealth and resources within Canadian borders are not enough. (p. 122.)

Gordon finds a striking continuity between the development of internal Canadian state-security and the emergence of its police and military missions abroad. Imperialism certainly has an economic foundation. But essential to its success is the threat and use of force. According to Gordon, military and paramilitary assaults against indigenous nations have been a formative part of Canada's history. The Royal Canadian Mounted (RCMP) and the Canadian armed forces got their start in the nineteenth century fighting first nations for their land, resources and political sovereignty. Such confrontations have multiplied since the 1960s, most dramatically at Oka, Quebec (1990) where the Canadian military were brought in to confront Mohawks over land-rights (pp. 276–83). A recent draft Canadian Defence Department counterinsurgency-manual which reflects official thinking (later hastily withdrawn) links the struggle against indigenous insurgency in Canada and those in underdeveloped countries (p. 287). Still, Canadian soldiers operating abroad commonly refer to the locales where they are based as 'Indian Country', conflating hostile and unfamiliar populations at home with those abroad (pp. 288–9). Former commander of Canadian forces in Afghanistan Tim Grant compared the difficulties policing the Afghan/Pakistan border to what the Canadian military faced at Oka: 'There is a tribal structure there that's been in place for a long time and for the federal government to come in and try to regulate it, Pakistan has the same challenges that we had during the Oka crisis' (p. 289). Meanwhile in the neoliberal period, budget-appropriations for the Canadian military have reached levels not seen since World-War II.

The notion lingers in the minds of Canadians that their government's military rôle overseas is primarily peace-keeping, so-called. Yet, of the over 72,000 UN peacekeepers deployed around the world, only 56 were Canadian as of 2006 while Canada's budget for peacekeeping was a mere \$6.2 million. That same year it spent \$1.4 billion on the war in Afghanistan (pp. 298–9). A whiff of multilateralism lingers as a result of Canada's enthusiastic endorsement of the specious doctrine of humanitarian intervention to justify its intervention in Afghanistan. It uses the same rationale for its part alongside the United States and France in helping to organise the coup against Aristide in Haiti.

The major contribution of Gordon's work is his empirical demonstration of the link between Canada's colonial-settler history and the development of its imperialism. Interesting in itself, this demonstration has important political implications. In Canada there has developed growing resistance against both the incursions of capital on indigenous lands as well as against Canadian imperialism in Latin America and Afghanistan. The two movements, however, continue to be largely politically separated from one another. They are in fact two fronts in a struggle against Canadian capitalism. Tying the two struggles together on the basis of Gordon's work hopefully will become an important political objective.

Gordon's principal theoretical point is that Canada's imperialism exists in its own right independently of that of the United States. Canada is an independent imperialist entity projecting its power abroad however much it may seem to coincide with that of the United States (pp. 14, 22, 276). In other words, Canada cannot be viewed as an American dependency.

We can at once affirm that Canada undoubtedly is an imperialist state. But two questions immediately emerge from this analysis. The first is purely historical. Granted that the dependency-school's view of Canada is today untenable, was that true in the 1950s and 1960s? Between then and now there intervened the Trudeau-era with its efforts to restrict foreign investment into Canada. Gordon mentions this interlude (p. 17) but does not seriously analyse its rôle in strengthening the national bourgeoisie.

As heir to the Canadian historiographical debate Gordon poses an additional question forcing us to choose between Canada as either dependent or imperialist. I would argue instead that Canada is both dependent and imperialist. I have no idea how far Canada is from God, but like Mexico it cannot be denied that it is too close to its neighbour geographically. As if to preclude in any way irritating its powerful neighbour post 9-11, Canada has been obliged to ingratiate itself by becoming a model security-state aping the United States as much as possible. Increased joint Canadian-American border-security measures have augmented state-control over the citizens of both countries while further meshing their intelligence-operations. The conclusion in 1994 of the Canadian and American economies by dint of the North Atlantic Free-Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has not only increased Canadian dependency on the American market but has speeded up the rationalisation of the continental marketplace with the terms largely set south of the border. Based on an increase in Canadian military budgets and the enhanced place of the military at the focal-point of the state, the rôle of Canada as a junior partner beside the US in the effort to control Haiti, Afghanistan, Iraq and the rest of the Middle East testify to growing dependence and integration.<sup>11</sup> Gordon contends that because Canada is an imperialist power it can operate independently of the United States. In order to establish this, Gordon would have to show that its foreign policy reflects a substantial number of instances in which Canada has independently projected its military and political power globally. But he fails to produce a single example of a projection of power which would substantiate the view of a Canadian imperialism independent of that of the United States.

Canada's dependence on the United States is further suggested by the evolution of imperialism since 1945. Lenin's understanding of imperialism as an unstable system, arising from monopoly-capitalism and the ongoing polarity between centre and periphery and

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11. Albo 2006.

subject to the disruption of uneven development, still seems pertinent. While the US has been hegemonic since 1945, pressures stemming from the Cold War, national-liberation struggles and subsequent third-world industrialisation led imperialism to evolve towards a Kautskyian-like ultra-imperialism based on collective administration by what has become known as the Triadic states. The management of this structure has demanded joint military control of the planet and an intensification of capitalist exploitation of its people and resources. The degree of autonomy of Canadian imperialism – alongside other lesser imperialist states – must be considered in this changing global context.

Post-Cold War, the United States has increased its military superiority over all other states or any possible combination of such states. As such, the United States projects its political and military power over Canada, the whole of Western Europe, Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand as well as most of the Middle East. US military and political hegemony provides an indispensable framework by which the exploitation of the global South by the global North is organised.<sup>12</sup> There is the view that US domination over this global system dating from World-War II remains fully intact.<sup>13</sup> Our opinion to the contrary is that US global power is in relative decline, especially in its economic aspects, and that the Kautskyian order it presides over is liable to disruption. Indeed, its waning economic influence is being compensated for by aggressive pursuit of war-making based on growing military expenditure, the latter increasing as the former diminishes. It is no exaggeration to assert that the military stands at the apex of the American state and society as it has become more and more indispensable to maintaining its global leadership. Certainly the growing gap between its military and economic power is foreboding. Rife with tensions, the system is furthermore liable to disruption by economic crisis and conflict between an economically declining United States and challenges from rising peripheral powers such as Iran, Russia and China. Canada is certainly an imperialist power as Gordon argues, indeed, its economy has never been stronger vis-à-vis its neighbour. But imperialism is not merely about economic strength but political and military power as well. In the light of the increasing pressures on its hegemony the idea that the United States will lessen its grip on Canada and allow it to go its own way seems far-fetched.

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12. Gowan 2010, pp. 5–10.

13. Panitch and Gindin 2005.

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