

# Trump's Pre-Inauguration Rhetoric: A Neo-Colonial Blueprint Through Critical Theory

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**Abstract:** This article critically examines Donald Trump's pre-inauguration rhetoric through the lens of critical theory, uncovering its neo-colonial and capitalist underpinnings. Drawing from the theoretical contributions of Jürgen Habermas, Louis Althusser, Kwame Nkrumah, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Guy Debord, the analysis demonstrates how Trump's economic and militaristic declarations perpetuate global capitalist dominance. His rhetoric exemplifies the colonization of the lifeworld, the operation of ideological state apparatuses, and the spectacle of power, all of which work together to reproduce and legitimize neo-colonial exploitation. The synthesis of these critical theories provides a comprehensive critique, highlighting the ideological and structural mechanisms that sustain global inequalities and calling for a praxis of resistance towards a more equitable global order.

**Keywords:** neo-colonialism, capitalist expansion, critical theory, ideological state apparatuses, spectacle of power, global inequalities

## 1. Introduction

Donald Trump's pre-inauguration rhetoric has garnered significant attention for its performative and often absurdist nature, raising concerns about the future of political discourse and governance. His remarks, particularly regarding Canada and the Middle East, exemplify a shift from traditional policy deliberation to a spectacle-driven model of politics. One of his most notable proposals was the suggestion to annex Canada as the 51<sup>st</sup> state, using "economic force" to achieve this goal. This declaration, reminiscent of colonial rhetoric, overlooks the complexities of international diplomacy and the deep historical relationship between the U.S. and Canada. Trump's framing of the issue reduces nuanced political relations to transactional terms, failing to account for Canada's sovereignty and the intricate web of international norms that govern cross-border interactions. In response, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's retort that "there isn't a snowball's chance in hell" (Murphy 2025) highlights the absurdity of the suggestion, signalling the unlikelihood of such an idea gaining traction on the global stage.

Furthermore, Trump's rhetoric regarding the Middle East, particularly his warning to Hamas that "all hell will break out" unless hostages are released by his inauguration (TOI World Desk 2025), embodies a form of brinkmanship that risks escalating tensions rather than resolving them. The stark language and threats of violence are reminiscent of a gladiatorial contest where only one side can emerge victorious, a strategy that may resonate with a domestic audience but undermines the delicate balance required in international diplomacy. By reducing complex issues to ultimatums and apocalyptic predictions, Trump's rhetoric risks alienating key stakeholders and destabilizing

fragile peace processes. These statements are not merely political positioning but reflect a broader trend in contemporary politics: the shift from governance to performance. In an age where media dominates the political landscape, political leaders increasingly rely on dramatic gestures and provocative language to capture attention, often at the expense of substantive policymaking. Trump's public declarations illustrate the growing convergence of politics and spectacle, where the performance of leadership takes precedence over the deliberative processes that should underpin sound governance. This shift is indicative of a postmodern political culture in which the distinction between reality and performance becomes blurred, and where the image of the leader becomes as important – if not more so – than the substance of their policies. In this context, Trump's rhetoric serves as both an example and a warning of the dangers of spectacle-driven politics, which prioritizes short-term political gains over long-term solutions to complex global challenges. As political discourse continues to evolve, it is crucial to critically assess the implications of such rhetoric, not only for U.S. governance but also for the future of international relations and the integrity of diplomacy in an increasingly media-saturated world. The trend towards spectacle-driven politics raises fundamental questions about the nature of leadership, sovereignty, and global governance in an era where image often supersedes substance. Ultimately, while Trump's rhetoric may be engaging and provocative, it challenges our understanding of what it means to govern responsibly and engage diplomatically in a world that increasingly values spectacle over substance.

Donald Trump has once again thrust the world into a state of heightened geopolitical anxiety with his recent statements regarding Greenland and the Panama Canal. His comments, made on 6 January 2025, suggest that the United States may resort to military or economic means to take control of these strategically significant regions. These statements are not merely the ramblings of an individual; they are emblematic of a broader imperialist agenda driven by capitalist interests and the inherent need to maintain U.S. hegemony on the global stage. The European Union's (EU) response, led by French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot, signals a defence of sovereignty that warrants closer examination from a socialist perspective. However, beneath the rhetoric of sovereignty lies an even deeper conflict one that challenges the very foundations of imperialism and the global capitalist order. Trump's remarks about Greenland and the Panama Canal should be understood within the context of a capitalist empire seeking to assert control over key economic assets. Greenland, with its rich natural resources, and the Panama Canal, a vital maritime passage, are not mere geographical locations; they are symbols of the strategic interests of global capitalism. The U.S. has long maintained a policy of dominance over such areas—both through direct control and economic coercion. Trump's failure to rule out military action to achieve this domination (Davies and Wendling 2025) exposes the aggressive nature of imperialism in the modern age, where force and economic leverage are often employed to maintain an unequal global order that benefits capitalist elites at the expense of the working class worldwide. The European Union's reaction, while defensive in its rhetoric, must be scrutinized through a socialist lens. Barrot's assertion that the EU will not tolerate attacks on its sovereign borders, as stated in his 8 January comments, reveals a critical contradiction in the European response (Bredemeier 2025). The EU, like the U.S., is an institution deeply entrenched in global capitalist systems that prioritize economic power over the well-being of ordinary people. While the EU may defend its borders against external threats, it does so from a position of power that is complicit in the exploitation of the Global South, where the majority of the world's resources are extracted for the benefit of imperial powers. Barrot's rhetoric, although framed as a

defence of European sovereignty, is ultimately a defence of capitalist borders that perpetuate inequality and imperialism. Trump's expansionist agenda is not an isolated phenomenon; it is part of a broader historical pattern of capitalist imperialism that has sought to expand the U.S. empire ever since the age of colonialism. The idea of "survival of the fittest," which Barrot criticizes, is not merely a survival strategy for nations, but a brutal philosophy that underpins capitalist expansionism. In this context, Trump's words are a reflection of the ruthless competitive logic of capitalism, where nations, as extensions of imperialist states, are pitted against each other in a global race for resources and power. This is the *realpolitik* of modern-day imperialism, where the sovereignty of nations is frequently disregarded in favour of maintaining the interests of capital. Moreover, it is crucial to recognize the economic motivations behind Trump's rhetoric. Greenland's vast natural resources, particularly in a warming world where the Arctic is becoming increasingly accessible, have long been a subject of interest for U.S. corporations seeking to exploit these riches. The Panama Canal, similarly, represents an indispensable global trade route that connects the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, facilitating the flow of capital between the major industrial powers. Trump's desire to control these regions is not simply about territorial expansion; it is about securing the economic interests of U.S. imperialism and its multinational corporations, ensuring that the profits generated from these resources remain firmly in the hands of the global capitalist elite. From a socialist perspective, the EU's response to Trump's rhetoric must be understood as a defence of an imperialist status quo. While the EU may rhetorically reject Trump's threats, it remains complicit in the capitalist system that drives such expansionist ambitions. The EU, like the U.S., seeks to protect its own imperialist interests, particularly in relation to global trade routes and resource extraction. Barrot's statement that Europe must "wake up and strengthen" reflects the EU's ongoing project of economic integration, which has consistently served to reinforce the power of multinational corporations and the capitalist class. Rather than a genuine defence of sovereignty, the EU's position is a defence of capitalist sovereignty, a system that perpetuates exploitation, inequality, and imperialist domination. Trump's comments about Greenland and the Panama Canal are not isolated provocations but are indicative of the broader imperialist dynamics that shape contemporary geopolitics. While the EU's defence of sovereignty may appear to be a challenge to U.S. expansionism, it ultimately serves to uphold the capitalist global order that benefits the elites at the expense of the working classes around the world.

A socialist critique of these developments reveals the need for a fundamental rethinking of global relations one that prioritizes the needs of the people over the interests of imperialist states and multinational corporations. Only through a radical transformation of the global economic and political system can we begin to dismantle the structures of imperialism that continue to shape the fate of nations and peoples around the world. Trump's pre-inauguration rhetoric encapsulates the enduring strategies of neo-colonialism and capitalist imperialism. His declarations, specifically his economic threat to annex Canada and his military aggression towards entities like Hamas, embody a complex synthesis of coercive power, economic domination, and ideological control. These statements are not mere political postures but are deeply embedded in the structural and ideological imperatives of global capitalism. To understand the full import of Trump's rhetoric, it is crucial to employ a critical theoretical framework that interrogates the deep structural forces at play. This article adopts a critical theoretical approach to analyse Trump's pre-inauguration rhetoric, drawing from the works of Jürgen Habermas, Louis Althusser, Kwame Nkrumah, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Guy Debord. These theorists provide a robust conceptual toolkit to explore how Trump's

rhetoric aligns with neo-colonial ambitions, perpetuates capitalist ideologies, and manipulates public consciousness. By employing these theories, we can uncover how his statements work not only to solidify America's geopolitical dominance but also to mask the structural inequalities inherent in global capitalism.

## **2. Colonization of the Lifeworld: Habermas's Framework**

Jürgen Habermas's concept of the colonization of the lifeworld offers a critical starting point for understanding Trump's rhetoric, especially his proposal to annex Canada through economic force. Habermas's theory revolves around the idea that, in advanced capitalist societies, the lifeworld, the sphere of everyday life, communication, and social interactions become increasingly subordinated to the imperatives of the economy and state (Habermas 1984). The lifeworld is where citizens engage in democratic debate, interact socially, and shape cultural norms. When colonized by economic rationality, these spaces are no longer arenas for free communication and public deliberation; they become subject to the instrumental logic of state and corporate interests.

In the context of Trump's rhetoric, the proposal to annex Canada via economic means exemplifies this colonization. By framing Canada's sovereignty as subject to American economic demands, Trump is reducing the political dimension of this relationship to mere market logic. This represents a shift in the very nature of democratic engagement, where issues of national sovereignty and diplomacy are dissolved into economic calculations. The lifeworld no longer serves as a site of rational-critical debate about issues such as borders or national identity but becomes an arena for corporate and state interests to dictate policy. This move is emblematic of how capitalist forces erode democratic processes, replacing public discourse with transactional negotiations governed by economic forces.

Habermas's analysis also emphasizes the role of public spheres in democratic societies. These public spheres, according to him, serve as sites for citizens to engage in rational-critical debate about political and social matters. However, when these spaces become colonized by economic logic, they lose their function as venues for democratic deliberation. In this sense, Trump's rhetoric and the use of economic coercion against a sovereign nation demonstrates how political discourse can be hijacked by systemic imperatives of global capitalism, further diminishing the space for public deliberation and the democratic engagement of citizens.

## **3. Ideological State Apparatuses: Althusser's Contribution**

Louis Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) provides a crucial lens for analysing how Trump's rhetoric functions within the broader ideological apparatus of the state. Althusser argues that the state does not merely enforce power through coercion but also through the ideological work performed by institutions such as the media, education, religion, and the law (Althusser 1971). These institutions, which Althusser calls ISAs, are responsible for maintaining and reproducing the conditions of capitalist production by shaping the ideological framework through which individuals interpret the world.

Trump's rhetoric serves as a powerful example of an ISA in action. When he declares that the U.S. should annex Canada through economic coercion, he is employing a form of ideological manipulation that normalizes imperialistic behaviour as a natural extension of American economic interests. In this case, the media acts as a crucial ISA, disseminating Trump's message to the public and framing it within the logic of national security, economic rationality, and patriotism. Through strategic

communication, the media not only amplifies Trump's statements but also aligns the audience with the underlying capitalist and imperialist ideologies that these statements advance.

Additionally, Althusser's concept of interpellation where individuals are 'hailed' into ideological positions can be observed in the way Trump's rhetoric positions American citizens. By framing his rhetoric as a defence of national sovereignty and security, Trump interpellates his audience into a nationalist ideology. This nationalist discourse works to align the interests of the American public with the broader goals of capitalist expansion, ensuring that the public remains compliant with the actions of the state, including its imperial ambitions.

#### **4. Neo-Colonialism and Capitalist Expansion**

Kwame Nkrumah's and Immanuel Wallerstein's theories on neo-colonialism and world systems provide essential insights into the global political economy within which Trump's rhetoric operates. Neo-colonialism, as Nkrumah defines it, refers to the continued dominance of former colonial powers over their former colonies, not through direct political control but through economic, military, and ideological means. For Nkrumah, neo-colonialism represents the continuation of imperialist practices in a post-colonial world (Nkrumah 1965). This concept helps us understand how Trump's rhetoric towards Canada and his interventions in the Middle East are not isolated actions but part of a broader strategy of economic and political domination that perpetuates inequalities in the global order.

Trump's actions mirror the logic of neo-colonialism in several ways. His attempt to annex Canada is an explicit example of economic coercion, aiming to expand U.S. control over its neighbouring country by threatening economic retaliation. This approach is grounded in the capitalist imperative to expand markets and resources, which is characteristic of neo-colonial exploitation. Furthermore, Trump's aggressive rhetoric towards Middle Eastern nations, particularly his threats against Hamas and other actors, reinforces the idea that the U.S. sees itself as a global hegemon, whose military and economic power must be exerted to maintain global dominance.

Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory provides a further layer of understanding. Wallerstein argues that the modern world economy is organized around a core-periphery structure, in which the core countries (like the U.S.) extract resources and labour from the peripheral and semi-peripheral countries (Wallerstein 1974). Trump's rhetoric can be seen as an attempt to reinforce the U.S.'s position in this global hierarchy. Through economic coercion and military intervention, he is seeking to ensure that peripheral regions continue to supply raw materials, cheap labour, and markets for the benefit of the U.S. and its capitalist interests.

#### **5. The Spectacle of Power: Debord's Insights**

Guy Debord's concept of the society of the spectacle offers a critical analysis of how power is mediated in modern capitalist societies. According to Debord, social life in capitalist societies is increasingly dominated by spectacle an image-driven reality where the appearance of things becomes more important than their substance (Debord 1967). This spectacle is not merely a distraction but an integral part of the functioning of capitalist systems, which rely on it to maintain control over the populace.

Trump's pre-inauguration rhetoric fits squarely within this framework. His dramatic declarations and sensationalist language serve to create a spectacle that captures the attention of the public, shifting focus away from the deeper, systemic issues of global inequality and imperialist violence. By transforming political discourse into a series of

media-friendly soundbites and theatrical gestures, Trump creates an illusion of action and decisiveness, obscuring the underlying capitalist logic that drives U.S. foreign policy.

Debord's analysis also underscores the role of the media in creating and maintaining this spectacle. Trump's messages are not simply conveyed through traditional political channels but are amplified and commodified by the media. In this sense, Trump's rhetoric becomes part of a broader spectacle that serves to legitimize his policies while diverting attention from the exploitative and unequal global capitalist system that underpins them.

## 6. Synthesis and Praxis: A Unified Theoretical Critique

The integration of these critical theories – Habermas's colonization of the lifeworld, Althusser's ISAs, Nkrumah's and Wallerstein's neo-colonialism, and Debord's spectacle – offers a comprehensive framework for understanding Trump's pre-inauguration rhetoric. These theories collectively reveal how Trump's statements function as part of a broader ideological and structural strategy to maintain global capitalist hegemony. Each theory provides a unique lens through which to understand different aspects of his rhetoric, from the erosion of democratic discourse to the ideological normalization of imperialist power.

This unified critique also underscores the need for praxis and active resistance against the ideological and structural mechanisms that perpetuate global inequalities. By challenging the spectacle, questioning the ideological state apparatuses, and dismantling the neo-colonial systems that sustain capitalist dominance, we can begin to construct an alternative political and social order based on justice, equity, and global solidarity.

## 7. Conclusion: Towards Resistance and Justice

Trump's rhetoric is not merely a set of political declarations but a manifestation of the deeper structural forces that sustain global capitalist exploitation. Through the frameworks provided by critical theory, we can see how his words and actions serve to reproduce and legitimate these inequalities, whether through economic coercion, ideological manipulation, or the spectacle of power. To challenge this rhetoric, we must engage in critical analysis that exposes these underlying structures of domination. By drawing on the insights of theorists like Habermas, Althusser, Nkrumah, Wallerstein, and Debord, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which capitalist imperialism operates and perpetuates itself. Only through collective action informed by these theoretical insights can we hope to resist the neo-colonial logic that continues to shape global politics and work towards a more just and equitable world order.

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