

Re)producing inequality: production and consumption under the imperial mode of living .

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As the French economist Alain Lipietz (2000) pointed out, there is a strong similarity between the social and the ecological issues in capitalism. Both nature and the worker are affected by the expansionary tendencies of capitalist production and valorisation. Consequently, it is in the interests of both workers and environmental protection to contain or overcome those tendencies.

This is, however, only one side of the coin. The other is a more contradictory relation between labour and the environment, particularly regarding the early industrialising countries: the very reproduction of the working class as part of the capitalist societies of the Global North is based on socio-environmental destruction. (This is not to deny that the environmental impact of the rich is much bigger than that of the subaltern classes).

The basic compromise between labour and capital rests on the willingness of labour to accept its subordination to capital under the condition that labour participates in the increase in material welfare enabled by a growing capitalist economy. Welfare increases, however, imply access to, and extraction of, resources. They produce emissions that have to be absorbed by natural sinks (such as forests or oceans in the case of CO₂), and they involve the exploitation of labour power elsewhere.

This can be particularly important in times of crisis. The minimal social unrest in capitalist core countries since the crisis starting in 2008 rests essentially on the fact that, in contrast to many countries of southern and eastern Europe and the Global South, the reproduction of the subaltern classes was never seriously put into doubt. The reason is that the capitalist core countries benefit from an unjust international order that guarantees them unlimited access to nature, and labour power cheaper.

The imperial mode of living

We have called this constellation the imperial mode of living (Brand and Wissen, 2017a, 2017b). It is inscribed into the institutions of an asymmetric geopolitical order and backed by the economic and military force of the countries of the Global North. Rooted in the contradiction between capital and labour, the imperial mode of living links the labour forces of different parts of the world in unequal ways.

It is not that workers in the capitalist core countries consciously welcome the subordination of their colleagues from the Global

South. Rather, it is the necessity of selling their labour power on the market which forces northern workers into the imperial mode of living and at the same time enables them to benefit from it, through cheap raw materials and pre-products from southern countries that are transformed or refined in northern factories; through communication and transport infrastructure that facilitates production and mobility in the Global North which would not be possible without the resources of the Global South and the cheap labour which extracts them; through commodities such as food and clothes whose low prices facilitate satisfaction of basic needs in the Global North through over-exploitation of nature and workers in the Global South.

Societal generalisation and global spread

Until the first half of the twentieth century, the imperial mode of living was restricted largely to the luxury consumption of the upper and middle classes. Workers were involved only at the margins, for example through consumption of sugar from European colonies which provided the over-exploited labourers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century with energy.

Things began to change with the Fordist class compromise after the Second World War. Owing to workers' struggles and their increasing structural and organisational power, a dynamically developing economy and the coupling of wages to increased labour productivity enabled large parts of the northern working class to buy and consume products in a variety and at a magnitude never known before. The imperial mode of living was consequently generalised in the Global North. TV sets, cars, refrigerators and washing machines entered and shaped the everyday life of working and middle class households. They facilitated the reproduction of the working class at the same time as they perpetuated, or even strengthened, patriarchal gender relations and a neocolonial world order. Without the resources, sinks and labour power of the Global South, the production of Fordist durable consumer goods would have been impossible.

In the course of globalisation - that is, the new international division of labour based on a high-tech revolution and shifting power relations - the imperial mode of living deepened

in the Global North and spread to the Global South where a growing middle class has adopted the consumption patterns of its northern counterpart. The dramatic socio-environmental consequences can be observed in the pollution of cities like Beijing and in rising eco-imperial tensions.

The imperial mode of living rests not only on capitalist accumulation but also on an external sphere: on non-capitalist or less developed territories that can be appropriated and valorised, and to which the socio-environmental costs of unsustainable patterns of production and consumption can be shifted. Its global spread implies that ever more of society becomes dependent on such spheres. The land grabbing in Africa, Asia and Latin America, the conflicts over deep sea resources and the struggle over emission quotas in international climate policy are examples of the tensions that arise from a globalised imperial mode of living. They threaten to increase over-exploitation of workers and nature, forced migration and the danger of military conflict.

Overcoming the imperial mode living

The challenge for workers of the Global North and South is to unite around new concepts of a good life. What is needed are patterns of production and consumption that no longer rest on the destruction of nature and exploitation of labour power. The dogma of national competitiveness has to be replaced by the pursuit of international solidarity.

There are lots of experiences to learn from, among them the 1 Million Climate Jobs Campaign, the Trade Unions for Energy Democracy in the US and the struggles for economic democracy and alternative production, waged, for example, by northern workers in the 1970s and 1980s. Their common denominators are, first, a use-value oriented approach, which is crucial for overcoming the 'jobs versus environment dilemma' (Räthzel and Uzzel, 2011). Production should not be driven by the objective of maximising profits; the structural imperative to perpetually create new needs as soon as the means to satisfy them have been developed has to be overcome; efforts should be directed to democratically negotiate what and how much is necessary for a good life for all in line with the reproductive requirements of nature. In capitalist core countries, a step in this direction would be a trade union strategy that places more emphasis on reducing working time.

Second, the struggles of workers and trade unions will have to go beyond the sphere of production and join those for environmental justice, the rights of refugees and gender equality. This is, on one hand, an issue of structural and organisational power. Linking these struggles is no easy task, but enhances the strength of emancipatory social forces. On the other hand, it is

an issue of mutual learning, transforming subjectivities and experimentally performing alternatives. As Räthzel and Uzzel (2011: 1221) have put it, 'Unions need to reinvent themselves as social movements, not only responsible for the working conditions of their members, but for their general living conditions as well.' Therefore it is necessary 'to tear down the invisible wall that exists between workers as workers in workplaces and workers as citizens outside their workplaces'.

Third, we consider radical democratisation necessary, as an end in itself as well as a means to pursue new social alliances and patterns of production and consumption. As the recent rise of the extreme right in many parts of the Global North has shown, liberal democracy is in severe crisis. The societies of the Global North, particularly, are at a crossroads: either they turn right on a path of exclusive and authoritarian stabilisation of the imperial mode of living – this is what, for example, a fortress Europe against migrants and refugees or Donald Trump stand for – or they turn left and begin to fundamentally transform their patterns of production, consumption and living. For this, a radicalisation of democracy – that is, its expansion to the economic centres of social power from which it has been excluded up to now – is indispensable.

It is particularly workers and trade unions in the Global North that are required here – and that can learn from each other, from their own experiences and from the struggles of their colleagues in the Global South.

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References

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