

Book Review

Kim Moody (2017) *On New Terrain: How Capitalism is Reshaping the Battleground of Class War*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.

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Reviewed by
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Kim Moody's book provides an impressive breadth of knowledge on the changes within both the working class in the United States (US) and its capitalist antagonist, challenging the narrative that class struggles have vanished. He puts forward the well-founded thesis that the working class has changed greatly since the 1970s, both regarding its composition and the size of the specific sectors in which it is involved. He decodes and refutes current myths and takes a critical look at current trade union strategies. The first third of the book is therefore highly recommendable and reads very fluently. After that, however, the text loses its stringency, which may be due to a lack of theoretical sharpening. In consequence, the second part of the book reads like a different book, focusing on the origins and transformation of the Democratic Party, highlighting how more and more capital enters party politics and election campaigns, and why a new workers' party is necessary. However, both sides seemed to be linked by the term "terrain". In the following, I would therefore like to discuss a few theoretical considerations concerning the terrain, the state and social reproduction that could strengthen the findings brought forward in *On New Terrain*.

The strength of Moody's book lies in the detailed and well-thought-out analysis of the US working class. The following aspects should be highlighted: First, according to Moody, there was not only a global shift of industry to the Global South from the United States, but also an enormous increase in the productivity of US industry, which was achieved through the development of technology, automation and the introduction of "Lean Production" – that is, the organisation and monitoring of every single step. This and the offshoring of jobs resulted in massive job losses.¹ Second, Moody proves that the working class has historically tended to be precariously employed and that the share of temporary and part-time contracts has not changed significantly in the United States compared to the 1980s. Even the often-discussed "gigariat" which has gained prominence in academic discourse in recent years – that is, employees who either receive their jobs via online platforms or are recruited by companies with online contracts – represents a negligible and hardly growing share of the working class. What has increased in the United States, however, is unemployment, which rose during the economic crisis of 2007–2008. In addition, pensions, health insurance and other social benefits have been reduced enormously, leading above all to an increase in old-age poverty, debts due to hospital stays and an overall decline in the provision of care to the working class in recent years. Third, the book analyses that, due to the globalisation of production and the current accumulation strategies, the logistics sector – in particular distribution and warehousing – has gained importance. Moreover, sectors

¹ This goes against Trump's and other conservatives' argument that there was a decline in US productivity, while in fact productivity rose due to automation and other factors, and workplaces were destroyed rather than offshored.

organising the reproduction of labour and capitalist infrastructures (cleaning, building management, waste disposal) have grown. Historically, these sectors have been dominated by low-paid and poorly organised women, Afro-Americans and Latin-American workers. As women have been pushed more into the labour market due to the downward spiral in industrial and mainly male wages, the proportions of women, Latin Americans and Afro-Americans in important sectors of late US capitalism have increased. This also has an impact on US trade union membership and specific class struggles, which are increasing in the care, education and other service and/or low-wage sectors. Moody's analysis provides a basis to explain why Feminism and movements such as Black Lives Matter have gained momentum among the working class.²

Although the book analyses the US working class very carefully, it does not answer what is meant by "terrain", what is new about it today and where exactly class struggles have shifted. Is terrain merely an abstract category and in a figurative sense to be understood in relation to "sector" or "subject"? This is supported by the fact that both the growing sectors of services, logistics and maintenance/cleaning are addressed as well as the new composition of the working class, and therefore issues such as racism, sexism and homophobia are brought more into the focus of class struggle as well as the changes in party politics. If Moody were to use the term terrain exclusively in this metaphorical way, a further definition would be superfluous. But as the text progresses, the question arises as to whether Moody also understands terrain as a material category, as the physical ground on which struggles – especially in the logistics sector and on distribution routes – can be fought. By not introducing the term, his analysis runs the risk of being more superficial than it should be. It is true that, due to the global value chain, capitalism has become more vulnerable to strikes and interruptions, especially in the fields of distribution and labour reproduction. But these struggles do not take place in a vacuum; they are channelled and often suppressed by the state. Considerations of industrial disputes that attempt to occupy the terrain – logistical hubs, supply routes, and so on – are frequently affected by specific police forces and specific legislation. The safeguarding of the circulation both through the construction of infrastructure and the concentration of fixed capital, as well as the safeguarding of the circulation of goods by employees, is organised and reproduced by state structures. Terrain and the state are therefore closely interwoven and can be well grasped by a materialist theory of the state, which understands the state as the crystallisation of past class struggles and a constant further development by means of prevailing power relations.

With regard to his understanding of the state, Moody oscillates between an absent state and the all-embracing "police state". The former is now being discovered by capital for the commodification and financialisation of social and political areas (such as the party politics of Democrats and Republicans), and the latter is expanding prisons and promoting massive surveillance and repression, especially against Afro-Americans. These observations are important in themselves, but they assume that the capitalist state somehow "normally" acts neutrally and independently of economic events in capitalism. However, the processes of austerity, financialisation, privatisation and repression cannot be considered separately, but are part of contradictory and interdependent dynamics that can be traced back to the capitalist and crisis-prone accumulation strategies organised within and throughout the capitalist state.

² Unfortunately, however, the book concentrates solely on the working class in the United States with a tendency to generalise the developments therein, while overlooking how the expansion of US companies to foreign markets changed labour, labour struggles and accumulation strategies there. In this way, Moody obstructs himself from giving a more detailed perspective on international labour struggles and processes of solidarity.

Moody underlines that there have been changes in the reproduction of fixed capital (and thus also circulating capital) and variable capital (the working people). Thus, he addresses the growing commodification of reproductive work, the growth of care work, and the low productivity and therefore the high necessity of variable capital – that is, of a large number of working people, compared to sectors in which machines gradually destroy jobs. He also addresses the growing pressure on workers from lean production and surveillance, stress and increased exploitation rates. What is missing is a link between the two. Here the Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) developed by Susan Ferguson and others might help.

From this perspective, the themes of the growing exploitation of workers through lean production and the expansion of the care sector and education sector could be more strongly linked. Lean production has revolutionised not only the world of work and production, but also reproduction. Many people are working in sectors in which the workload has increased, and women have been pushed into low-paid jobs, thus losing their position in the household army, so that no resources are free within the working class to take over the reproduction of the labour force. The care work organised by the state in increasingly commodified form and the expansion of food chains are closely linked to the concentration of labour. As the importance of these sectors for capitalism grows, so does the demand for variable capital for better pay and better working conditions. The analysis of changes in reproduction conditions is also closely interwoven with the state. Moody runs the risk of depicting the market and capitalist companies as operating outside the state, and snatching the reproductive sectors from it, so to speak, in order to organise them into markets. This perspective overlooks the fact that the state is a capitalist state and also develops the market processes. Particularly in times of crisis, financial interests on the one hand and an authoritarian implementation of accumulation strategies on the other increase.³

The book is absolutely worth reading as there are helpful answers regarding “new class politics” and solidarity in struggle, the role of lean production and the myth of the precariat. Moody, however, often remains descriptive and unclear in the analysis of the “terrain” itself, the social reproduction and its impact on the understanding of labour struggles in certain sectors and in the capitalist, neo-liberal and increasingly authoritarian state.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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³ As Moody himself correctly describes, Donald Trump, for example, is not just a mistake of history, but an expression of a specific capitalist and state-like dynamic that throws all democratic and juridically developed norms overboard and reveals an increasingly brutal class struggle from above that no longer cares for compromise and social partnership.