

Book Review

Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen (2021) *The Imperial Mode of Living. Everyday Life and the Ecological Crisis of Capitalism* (Trans. Zachary King). London: Verso. 256 pp. ISBN 9781788739122. Paperback £16.99

Reviewed by
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Fundamental political questions are always also questions about education – and not just in the sense that knowledge of political positions, processes and institutions is essential for (future) voters. If politics is the field in which societies debate and decide their futures, this applies in a much more comprehensive sense: Without the skill gained during educational processes to recognise current disputes as questions about the future, about how we are living and how we want to live, it is impossible to conceive of democratic participation or imagine a general education that can provide direction in the present. This applies to the skills of workers in their workplaces, too. When we think of a deep social-ecological transformation of our social and economic lives, the sphere of production is key – and changes in this sphere have to do with knowledge, education, perspectives on how to perceive the world and its problems, and how we can deal with them.

This is particularly true in times when crisis situations are so evident that a variation of the Hamlet quote “the world [really: the time] is out of joint” has become a familiar diagnosis of the present. In such a situation, education theory and practice require more than astounding social science analyses and the use of such analyses to reveal problems – that is, the potential to stimulate educational theory and didactics. The study by Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen satisfies this requirement to a satisfyingly high degree. It follows the implicit didactic motive to make understandable what is happening, as do all good social science analyses. In addition, it uses the term “imperial mode of living” to spotlight one field in particular in which subjectivity and conditions meet and produce each other.

What do the authors mean by “imperial mode of living”? The term is intended to characterise a way of living that is at home mainly in the Global North, but increasingly also among the middle class of emerging countries. It shapes “subjects and their common sense”, standardises them and makes them capable of action “as women and men, as individuals who maximize use and feel superior to others, as people striving for particular forms of the good life” (p. 43). This mode of living may appear coherent and beneficial from the perspective of individuals who practise it, but it becomes paradoxical once it is generalised. That is so because *this* “good life” assumes inequality and, with its appropriation, the exclusion of many others from it. In view of the limitations of the planet, the “*American way of life* with its individual transport, meat-heavy diet and consumer goods that rely strongly on natural resources” (p. 116) can only be generalised at the price of its destruction. Nevertheless, it has prevailed as the key principle of a good life, which some believe they lead justifiably and which for others is a promise. But this promise can never be fulfilled, because the imperial mode of living is based on externalising its costs: “This is evident most of all

in cheap commodities such as food, durable consumer goods or the materials for their production, made in other countries or regions under socially and ecologically destructive conditions” (p. 62). Only on this basis could the masses’ participation in (sometimes hedonistic) consumption be maintained while the income of the masses was kept relatively low. An imperial mode of living thus means not only a relatively comfortable lifestyle based on consumer goods, but at the same time a global power relationship that penetrates economically, ecologically, politically and socially. It does so economically and ecologically because the growth logic of capitalism cannot function without ever new, as free-of-charge as possible, valorisation of human and natural resources any more than it can function without constantly renewed political and social demand by consumers. This is so because only their continued privileged use of a mode of living that requires externalisation of its costs to an elsewhere against which the metropole protects itself by drawing strict borders, for example against the influx of migrants.

The imperial way of life is also a way of working. On the one hand, the material, organisational and value-based forms of wage labour are in many cases directly linked to the world market, especially in productive industries with relatively high wages. Relatively cheaper intermediate products and raw materials from other regions make production cheaper. Transnational companies are usually organised in such a way that a large part of the value appropriation takes place in the centres. Coupled with the political power of the workers, this allows for relatively higher wages and for better public infrastructure and services.

This implies a global hierarchy. The working and living conditions in the economies of the Global South, with their prevailing forms of resource extraction, industry and services, have been essentially oriented towards the economic needs of the capitalist centres since the beginning of colonialism. Inner-societal class, gender and racialised relations are essentially, although not exclusively, oriented towards this.

Especially from an ecological perspective, it is essential that the imperial way of life is reproduced by the subaltern wage-earners of the Global North: They participate in it – to varying degrees – because they have the opportunity to benefit from it; they cannot do otherwise because they depend on it to secure their own existence. In other words, wage earners participate in the imperial way of life and reproduce it as the dominated. In addition, as consumers, they benefit materially from this way of life to a much lesser extent, and produce and externalise lower socio-ecological costs than the middle and upper classes do, due to the quantity and the way they consume.

To characterise this mode of living using the adjective “imperial” aims at more than a bold play for attention. Coining the term is not only structurally but also historically justified, as the authors show when looking at the global history of the last few centuries (Chapters 4 and 5). The conditions that applied to colonialism are shown to their full extent during the phase of industrial Fordism, whose mode of accumulation was based on linking mass production and mass consumption: “The imperial mode of living ... is a kind of compromise between the interests of those in power and the demands and desires of their subalterns” (p. 70). With the crisis of Fordism, however – according to the authors’ theory – a new mode of perception opened up: “A historical window of opportunity opened during the crisis of Fordism and the imperial mode of living was challenged” (p. 74). The techniques which even critical analyses of industrial capitalism saw as emancipation from the demands of nature through the 1960s, are now seen as over-exploitation of the planet. It is necessary to understand nature as *societal* relationships, as well as the externalisation of production costs and their consequences. During the last few decades, as was rarely the case before, societies empowered themselves as subjects of politics and authors of their development during lively and controversial processes of self-conception; in the process, they

developed critical and self-critical insights into the human use of nature.

However, this window closed again “with the enforcement of a neoliberal response to the crisis” (p. 103). Up to and including the concept of “green capitalism” (Chapter 7 is devoted to its criticism), many of the alternatives developed between the 1960s and 1990s have since become a productive force in a newly restructured capitalist economy. Emancipatory impulses in particular – which aimed at expansion of the scope of life, of self-realisation in the form of self-optimisation and self-valorisation – fired up the process of neo-liberal restructuring and were integrated into new forms of the imperial mode of living. To question one’s self and one’s own way of life is out of date. In the meantime, obscene symbols of oversized appropriation of public space and natural resources, like the mini-tanks and bonsai trucks called SUVs populate not only the streets of the Global North but also the metropolitan regions of emerging countries. Using the automotive industry and its mutation of form, the authors demonstrate impressively how socially achieved gains in ecological efficiency are overcompensated for by the self-actualised consumption of the imperial mode of living, which is unquestioningly positioned as legitimate.

The authors break the genteel consensual silence that reigns in the car country, Germany, about this scandal of daily life, which brazenly displays asymmetrical appropriation (not to mention the “environmental compatibilities” created by fraud). By doing so, they demonstrate an issue that is important in today’s public discourses and societal learning processes: “visualizing” the mechanisms of externalisation as the foundation of a mode of living that is based on extremely unequal appropriation (p. 168). Questioning situations rather than blindly accepting them as facts would be a beneficial maxim nowadays – for public debate, and for social and political education. This would open the eyes to alternatives, whether they be key principles of “good life” or practised modes of living. Brand and Wissen thus close their discussion with a view towards the “contours of a solidary mode of living” (p. 183) as it emerges today. The “green economy” promises both ecological sustainability and a new growth spurt for the capitalist economy. The authors do not accept this, and are convinced that liveable futures that are worth living can only be achieved by decoupling from capitalism’s growth logic. “Green capitalism” continues to rely on the “automatic subject” of utilisation (Karl Marx), which controls the behaviour of *Homines oeconomici* through incentives. However, the authors illuminate the opportunities for transforming subjectivity, which – free of the markets’ forces of utilisation – is based on nothing else than collectively, that is socially, won insights. In a world in which the eight richest people possess as much as the entire poorer half of humanity combined, there is certainly no lack of knowledge about the conditions. But this knowledge must be developed through educational processes if it is to become a motive for leaving the golden cage of the imperial mode of living. A trust anchored in shared insights that together another life is possible could arise – a slower, certainly more modest life, but one with significantly expanded freedom to design the collective conditions of life.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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