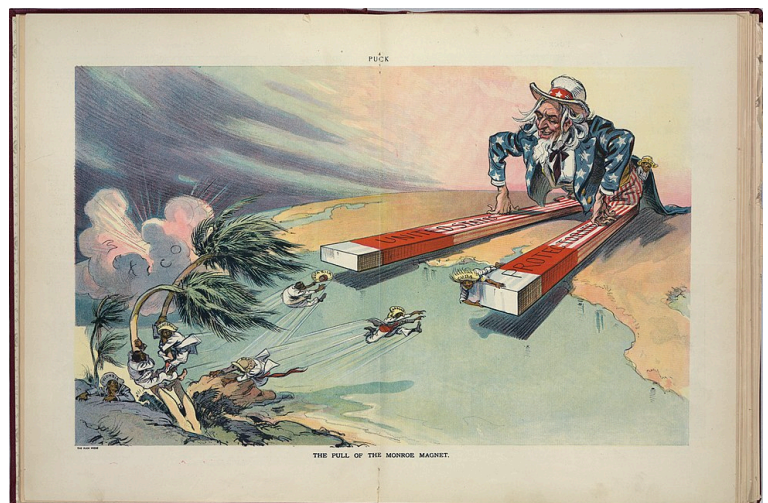


## The Left and the Imperial Mode of Living

*NEW PROGRESSIVISM IN IBERIAN AMERICA AND EUROPE*

Ulrich Brand | Markus Wissen

Just when our book was published in the spring of 2017 and was well received by the general public, the German left was in the midst of an intense and controversial debate that continues to this day. In reaction to the electoral success of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD, according to the German acronym) party and the conservative criticism of the immigration policy pursued by Angela Merkel in 2015, the left tended to split into two sectors. The first focused on the fight against growing xenophobia and racism, which it considered a phenomenon that encompasses society as a whole, i.e. beyond social classes. The second emphasised the experience of an intensified class struggle from above, coupled with the impossibility of articulating this experience in an emancipatory way, due to the fact that since the end of the 1980s, German social democracy had made class issues invisible; it is because of this that a growing part of the working class tends towards chauvinism and racism.



The pull of the Monroe magnet / Date 1913 / Source: Library of Congress  
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Original url: <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2011649618/>  
Author: Keppler, Udo J., 1872-1956, artist. No known restrictions on publication. This work is in the public domain in the United States because it was published (or registered with the U.S. Copyright Office) before January 1, 1928.

We believe that in this debate, we have raised some questions that help to understand the current situation from a critical perspective and that we have highlighted certain aspects that are generally either not taken into account by the

left or are only insufficiently considered, even though they are of transcendental relevance for an emancipatory social and political project and its respective strategies. As the reviews positively emphasised, we have thus countered with our book a widespread sense of helplessness that prevails in the debates on (non)sustainability.

Our book has thus—intentionally or unintentionally—intervened in this controversy. This is due, above all, to the fact that we analyse recent migration and refugee movements in the context of the destructive consequences of the imperial mode of living. We interpret the rise of the far right as an attempt by certain forces, especially in the Global North, to secure the imperial mode of living with authoritarian measures against the claims of those who have hitherto been excluded from this mode of living or who have been condemned to bear the socio-ecological costs of it. Unsurprisingly, our book, like that of Stephan Lessenich (2016), was well received by the aforementioned anti-racist sector of the German left, while the class-political sector regarded it rather sceptically.

### Critique 1: The Concept of the Imperial Mode of Living

Analysing the results of the 2017 federal elections in Germany, Dennis Everberg (2018) uses the concept of the imperial mode of living to explain the growing share of votes for the AfD. Eversberg notes the rise of "authoritarian nationalism",

*While authoritarians try to defend this way of life by strengthening borders and propagating economic nationalism, neoliberals try to modernise it through globalised markets and technological competition. The decisive challenge for the left is to create a third pole of global solidarity in order to deal with the multiple crises by overcoming the imperial mode of living.*

with which part of the electorate is reacting to migration and economic crises as well as to shifts in political power and international tensions. According to the author, this is opposed by a "progressive neoliberalism" of those who benefit from neoliberal globalisation and who fight against economic borders and racial discrimination. Despite their seemingly opposing approaches, we see that, under the perspective of the

imperial mode of living and its (growing) consequences, both fractions are moving in the same direction. While authoritarians try to defend this way of life by strengthening borders and propagating economic nationalism, neoliberals try to modernise it through globalised markets and technological competition. In this scenario, according to Eversberg, the decisive challenge for the left is to create a third pole of global solidarity in order to deal with the multiple crises by overcoming the imperial mode of living.

Eversberg's position and the concept of the imperial mode of living in general have been criticised, especially by those who emphasise the class content of the multiple crises and who try to formulate a perspective that potentially mobilises the lower and middle classes. In his extensive review of our book, Klaus Dörre (2018a, b) criticises that we neglect the intensification of social tensions within the countries of the Global North in favour of an assumed central contradiction between them and the Global South. According to him, our approach trivialises the fact that many people in the Global North struggle for their material survival and, in particular, makes the class conflict vanish behind an imagined way of life shared by all. Similarly, Günter Thien (2018) criticises that we describe the class dimension of the imperial mode of living, but fail to ground it analytically. Thus, the class contradiction is subsequently integrated into our approach as a stratification of the imperial mode of living; however, this contradiction is irrelevant for its constitution. Consequently, our critique remains in the moral impetus: both the top executives of a multinational company in the North and the people who work there should be reprimanded, thus opening up an unbridgeable gulf between these two groups on the one hand and the ordinary human beings in the Global South on the other (Sablowski and Thien 2018). According to Stefanie Hürtgen's (2018) critique, we start from an "us in the North" to which "the" South is contrasted. In this way, we

would downplay the situations and potentialities of antagonism inherent in the current neoliberal and authoritarian class struggle from above.

## Critique 2: Feminism and Care Work

A second line of criticism is feminism. Adelheid Biesecker and Uta von Winterfeld have analysed our book from their concept of externalisation (Biesecker and Winterfeld 2014). They emphasise that those subaltern people who have to

*The imperial mode of living relies primarily on unpaid reproductive labour, which is mostly provided by women and which creates the condition for the commodification of (male) labour power under capitalism.*

bear the socio-ecological costs of the imperial mode of living form a generalised and non-homogeneous group. The imperial mode of living relies primarily on unpaid reproductive labour, which is mostly provided by women and which creates the condition for the

commodification of (male) labour power under capitalism.

According to them, the basis for this generalised externalisation is always a double process of separation and re-appropriation of nature and female labour power. Similarly, Christa Wichterich (2016) stresses that the imperial mode of living not only asymmetrically connects the Global North with the Global South but is also based on complex interconnections between national and international social relations: in the societies of the Global North, care work is

*Cheap female labour from the Global South is integrated into the reproduction of middle and upper-class households in the Global North.*

unevenly distributed between men and women. The increased participation of women in paid work and the neoliberal flexibilisation of everyday life led to the care crisis. The latter is managed through care chains, along which cheap female labour

from the Global South is integrated into the reproduction of middle and upper-class households in the Global North. The supply crisis is externalised. Christa Wichterich sees a "care extractivism" taking shape here.

## Critique 3: The Global South and Global Power Relations

A third point of criticism concerns the role of the Global South. According to her, in our conceptualisation, the role of the Global South is too simplistically sketched. First, the main cause of wealth in the Global North is not the exploitation of the working class and nature in the Global South, but their relatively higher degree of productivity, the structure of their (industrial) production systems and the corresponding production of surplus value through wage exploitation in the Global North itself (Sablowski 2018). We would then considerably overestimate the role of exploiting nature and human beings in the Global South. As Gerd Schoppengerd (2017) argued, we would, in turn, underestimate the forms and strength with which the ruling classes organise themselves in the Global North and the Global South, both internationally and nationally. Beyond that, we would neither analyse the differences between the countries of the Global South nor the enormous progress in the fight against poverty nor the power of the former imperialist centres is increasingly being called into question. This argument was made with an eye on China and many Iberian American countries during the resource boom between 2003 and 2014.

Finally, it was proposed that a wider reception of postcolonial and decolonial theories and critiques would help us to understand better both the role of migrants and refugees in Global North countries, the discourses about them and their ways of acting, and the different relations of power and domination in postcolonial societies in the Global South. The concept of the imperial mode of living should be intertwined with critical knowledge in the countries of the Global South.

## Critique 4: Contours of a solidary way of life

Concerning the alternatives and what we call "contours for a solidary way of life", our argumentation is criticised as being too vague, insufficiently focused and not an adequate foundation for establishing a social and political

*The reproduction of the working class in the North has benefited not only from the institutionalised engagement of the class struggle in the Global North but also from the possibility of access to nature and labour power on a global level.*

antagonism, which is considered necessary for a radical social transformation. Hans Thie (2017) sees a decisive weakness of the book in the fact that the strategies we propose lack a "political economy of the contrary". We neglected to formulate, in concrete terms, an ecologically and socially attractive mode of production and way of life

that does not come at the expense of others and is worth fighting for.

## Responses and Further Conceptual Developments

We are very grateful for these criticisms and are glad that the book has been so widely received and triggered so many debates. Naturally, the reactions and criticism of our book have motivated us to refine our argumentation and develop it further.

In this way, we have tried to clarify the significance of the concepts of class and social reproduction as well as the relationship between these concepts and ecological questions for the reproduction and crisis of the imperial mode of living. We underline that the imperial mode of living has highly contradictory consequences. One consequence is that it separates the working people in the Global North from those in the Global South. The reproduction of the working class

*It is essential to understand how wage earners in the Global North are structurally integrated into the imperial mode of living, i.e. through their subaltern status in that they can only sell their labour power and nothing else.*

in the North has benefited not only from the institutionalised engagement of the class struggle in the Global North but also from the possibility of access to nature and labour power on a global level. This has made and continues to make it possible to externalise the socio-ecological costs of resource and energy-intensive production and consumption patterns. An imperialist

world order ensures this possibility. It is by no means a question here of blaming the working class of the Global North or taking refuge in a purely moral form of critique. Rather, it is essential to understand how wage earners in the Global North are structurally integrated into the imperial mode of living, i.e. through their subaltern status in that they can only sell their labour power and nothing else. The inclusion of the Global North wage worker into the imperial mode of living has always been a subaltern relation. Although the imperial mode of living has had levelling effects by raising the level of general material well-being, these have always been overlaid by its hierarchising effects. And they are the latter that have recently become more prominent.

We have developed all this in a text (Brand and Wissen 2019) in which we address the class content of our concept,

*An essential component of this working-class environmentalism consists not only of an organic connection between wage labour and ecology but also of the reorientation of production towards the use-values and reproductive needs of human beings and society, whereby social reproduction and care work become of central importance.*

examining care work more systematically and making the emancipatory perspective of a solidary way of life more palpable. In doing so, we draw on both Stefania Barca and Emanuele Leonardi's concept of working-class environmentalism (2018) and the debate on a "new class politics" initiated by the Institute for Societal Analysis of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation (Candeias 2021). We argue that



the ecological crisis, the economic crisis and the worsening of working conditions, even in the core sectors of the Global North (e.g. in the automobile industry), could point to a situation in which the promises of the imperial mode of living seem to become less and less viable, not only for the vast majority in the Global South but also for a growing group of wage earners in the Global North. If we exclude authoritarian solutions, it could be a perspective that jobs and material well-being no longer depend on ecological destruction but on protecting the environment. Or, formulated from a critical perspective: a completely different design of social relations with nature in sectors such as food, mobility, clothing, housing, etc. This would create new perspectives for a social-ecological transformation that aims to overcome the imperial mode of living and encompasses the possibility for wage earners, especially those organised in trade unions, to participate in this transformation actively. An essential component of this working-class environmentalism consists not

*Concerning the Global South, its integration into the world market and the role of the imperial mode of living, we aim to show the global dimension of hegemonic everyday life in the capitalist centres, and its continuing power of attraction for many people in the Global South.*

only of an organic connection between wage labour and ecology but also of the reorientation of production towards the use-values and reproductive needs of human beings and society, whereby social reproduction and care work become of central importance. Moreover, we should not forget that the anti-racist camp often also has a class perspective. But this perspective is rather internationalist and not so much focused

on the national scale and its agreements and struggles.

Concerning the societies of the Global South, the forms of their integration into the world market and the role of the imperial mode of living in both the Global South and the Global North, we would like to emphasise that our approach aims to demonstrate the global dimension of hegemonic everyday life in the capitalist centres, as well as its continuing power of attraction for many people in the Global South. Beyond that, we want to elucidate its destructive socio-economic, political and economic consequences. We do not deny that the North's capitalism is, to a large extent, based on the exploitation of people and nature in the Global North. The conditions in the meat factories or the harvest are just two examples of how capitalist business as usual is presented. In addition, an increasing number of societies in the Global South are becoming increasingly dependent on access to natural resources and labour beyond their borders, i.e. in other countries of the South, which is leading to further internal differentiation of the Global South. This takes place mainly in sub-imperial relations, for example, between the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and the less developed countries of the Global South. During these developments, both more complex class relations are being established, with middle and upper strata wanting to emulate the consumption patterns of their supposed peers in the North and a more exacerbated exploitation of labour coupled with its capitalist appropriation.

It seems that our perspective has also aroused some unease in the political economy of the left, for we do not praise the recent economic growth and development in many countries of the Global South, especially in China and many other countries, mainly in Asia and Latin America, and in other resource-exporting countries. We argue that, on the one hand,

*The focus on quantitative improvements and growth rates alone seems to be an ideology of quantity that denies that economic miracles under capitalist conditions occur at the expense of people and nature.*

capitalist growth in the countries of the Global South improves the living conditions of many people, especially the elites. However, as we can observe in Iberian America, these elites defend their positions at any cost and with authoritarian measures, in which the respective middle classes support them in times of crisis. The focus on quantitative improvements and growth rates alone seems to be

an ideology of quantity that denies that, despite all innovations and possible redistribution policies, economic miracles under capitalist conditions occur at the expense of people and nature.

Many critical contributions in political economy still underestimate that North-South relations are not only about production and value transfer but also material issues that cannot necessarily be represented in monetary terms. As Alf Hornburg (2010) formulates, a decisive element of global domination is an ecologically unequal exchange that privileges Global North societies regarding the "appropriation of ecological time and ecological space".

*A decisive element of global domination is an ecologically unequal exchange that privileges Global North societies.*

This is not only about economic values and surplus labour value but also about violence, expropriation, racism and ecological destruction. It is against this background that the high economic productivity and surplus value in the North must be interpreted. For future research, it would be interesting to understand how the mechanisms of wealth transfer work, both biophysically and in terms of value, and how these mechanisms can be represented in the production of value and material well-being in the countries in question, as well as which actors, mechanisms and power relations are decisive for these processes.

Broadly speaking, the concept of the imperial mode of living points to a better understanding of a global constellation of power and domination that is reproduced at all levels through countless strategies, practices and unintended

*The imperial mode of living also reproduces society's mostly destructive relations with nature.*

consequences: from bodies, ways of thinking, desires and daily actions, through regions and nationally organised societies, to the largely invisible and intentionally hidden structures that enable global interaction. This mode also reproduces society's mostly destructive relations with nature, leading to

enormous material transfers within regions and countries and on a global scale. In these transfers, relations of domination are represented and reproduced.

Concerning societal alternatives, we know we do not show any clear path toward a socio-ecological transformation. There is a simple reason: such a path does not exist, at least for now. We see the danger that with the idea of a seemingly straightforward alternative, the many causes of the multiple crises and the mechanisms of power and domination, whether structural or those that characterise everyday life, would be lost sight of. It would also blur the view of the great

*The question of freedom is crucial for an emancipatory strategy and an emancipatory project. How can we maintain individuality without living at the expense of others?*

diversity of existing alternatives. Transformation naturally implies an entirely different state policy and action by collective actors, but also a debate about politics itself, from questions of how to organise society's (re)production (and its international integration), the social division of labour, and the material and mental infrastructures.

The question of freedom is crucial for an emancipatory strategy and an emancipatory project. Andreas Novy (2018) emphasises that the imperial mode of living is not only related to material well-being; its appeal also lies in the fact that it enables, or at least promises, individual freedom rights and a "self-determined way of living within a society of competition" (ibid.: 54), i.e. the absence of paternalism and the promise of individuality and autonomy in their particular way of life. At the same time, the imperial mode of living breaks with the universal norm of equality based on human rights; it represents freedom tantamount to not touching one's way of life and sacrosanct consumption. This aspect has not been sufficiently elucidated in our work, which is more focused on social structures and the practices and routines of everyday life. The current rediscovery of Karl Polanyi in critical debates has to do with this challenge for the left: What does it mean to act and live responsibly in a society characterised by the systematic production of irresponsibility? (Brie, 2018) A relevant political question is: How can we maintain individuality without living at the expense of others? (Novy, 2018).

Our approach to the imperial mode of living has to be read as a contribution to progressive struggles and the search for substantial alternatives, as an analytical-political background for understanding why a fundamental emancipatory socio-ecological transformation is needed, and why, against the background of historical and current experiences, a deeper reflection on strategies is required.

We place ourselves in the tradition of revolutionary realpolitik (Rosa Luxemburg) and radical reformism (Joachim Hirsch), insisting that a counter-hegemonic project of radical transformation has to develop through concrete changes

*Radical transformation does not come about through existing political and economic institutions but through different conflicts that actors fighting for emancipation fight and win against the defenders of the status quo.*

and struggles that take place on different levels. We insist that, apart from explicit political and social struggles, the contradictory consciousness and actions of human beings in everyday life are inescapable points of view for radical transformation. Often, this leads to changes that are not very spectacular but acquire their relevance on a collective level,

both socially and politically, as social movements or within existing organisations.

First and foremost, radical transformation does not come about through existing political and economic institutions but through different conflicts that actors fighting for emancipation fight and win against the defenders of the status quo. We, therefore, hope that our original considerations embodied in the 2017 book, together with the subsequent more precise elaboration of our arguments, to which we were motivated by criticisms, will also contribute to building bridges between the two sectors of the left mentioned at the start.

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