

Social and ecological crisis: it's about living differently

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Review by Simon Pirani of The Imperial Mode of Living: everyday life and the ecological crisis of capitalism (Verso, 2021), by Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen

Imagine, if you will, a British trade union branch that votes to oppose expansion of the local airport. After their meeting, some members head for the pub.

“That was a good decision. It’s not working class people flying in those planes”, says Tom.

“But working class people do fly”, says Richard. “My neighbour is a working class person. He goes to Portugal twice a year with his whole family. And he drives a BMW. We’ll never protect the environment if people like that don’t wake up.”

Harriet chips in. “Your neighbour is an exception. Most working class people will be lucky to get one holiday abroad during the year. And we’ll never win them to the cause of transition away from fossil fuels by asking them to make personal sacrifices. Why should they?”

For crying out loud, comrades. You haven’t even got the beer in yet, and you’re recycling stereotypes. You’re talking about individuals “waking up”, or about whether “we” (who?!) will ask them to sacrifice.

At this point in the conversation – and believe me, I have sat through similar ones – I would be hoping for someone to remind us that it just isn’t that simple, to talk about the social and economic structures that underlie consumption ... and to suggest that maybe it’s “our” thinking that needs to shift, towards better understanding these structures and the way they shape workers’ lives in rich countries.

Just such an intervention is made by Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen in *The Imperial Mode of Living*. They not only try to get under the skin of consumerism and its effect on the population – including the working-class population – in rich countries. They also offer, in a Marxist framework, an analysis of the ecological and social crises of 21st century capitalism that now find expression in every fight over airport expansions, road projects or climate technofixes in the rich world, and in the desperate struggles against extractivism and capitalist expansion, and even for survival, outside it.

Imperial structures

The core idea on which the “imperial mode of living” concept rests, Brand and Wissen write, is that:

[E]veryday life in the capitalist centres [what I call the “rich countries”, SP] is essentially made possible by shaping social relations and society-nature relations elsewhere, i.e. by means of (in principle) unlimited access to labour power, natural resources and sinks [e.g. rainforests and oceans that absorb more carbon than they emit] [...] on a global scale. (pages 39-40)

The exploitation of labour, and the ravaging of nature, elsewhere is an essential element in shaping the rich world’s



A student protester in New York, Earth Day 1970. Was there a missed opportunity to tackle ecological crisis?

economies – the ways that stuff is produced, distributed and consumed. More than that, the neo-imperial relations between the rich countries and the rest shape social and cultural structures of everyday life, Brand and Wissen write.

They counterpose their idea of the “imperial mode of living” to sociological concepts of “conduct of everyday life”, which “leaves social conditions in the shadows”, and lifestyle”, that focuses on individuals and “includes a moment of freedom of choice that abstracts from class structures, gender and racialised relations, as well as from the organisation of capitalist societies as nation states” (page 44).

Everyday practices, though, have a central place in this theory.

Unsustainability is a very practical fact that is mostly lived unconsciously. But living “unconsciously” does not mean that the imperial mode of living is not connected to multiple intentional strategies for its continuation.

These are the strategies of governments and corporations, in the first place; they have a history that “begins long before the moment of action and decision making, a history of which individuals do not need to be aware” (page 45).

Purchasing a car – Richard, whose neighbour drives the BMW, take note – is “unquestionably a conscious action”. But it can not be understood by cost-benefit analysis (that is, in terms of whether the hire-purchase payments economically rational, given Richard’s family budget). That misses a “crucial dimension”: that the act of purchasing “essentially results from infrastructural and institutional conditions, as well as from dominant imaginations which have been habitually internalised” (page 46).

These infrastructural and institutional conditions, and the “dominant imaginations”, themselves constitute the “mode of living”, of which “externalisation” – the exploitation of “elsewhere” outside the rich countries – is a central feature.

This is evident above all in the flow of cheap commodities – food, consumer goods or materials for their production – made outside the rich world “under socially and economically destructive conditions”. Brand and Wissen give the example of “transnational care-extractivism”: the way in which the global middle classes “secure their own reproduction through the appropriation of capacities of care from other poorer regions, dispossessing them and thereby also transferring the reproduction crisis onto them” (page 63).

This “externalisation”, in Brand and Wissen’s view, is linked to processes of valorisation (which I would call “enclosure”), accumulation and reproduction that many Marxists perceive in the late 20th and 21st century forms of capitalist expansion. Indeed I was left with a question mark as to what is specifically “imperial”, rather than capitalist, about the mode of living they describe.

Accumulation, Brand and Wissen argue (page 51), requires a “correlation between norms of production and consumption”. Through consumption of consumer goods, reproduction of the labour force becomes an “inner moment of the circuit of capital” – not automatically but often as a result of social struggles, of the political and social institutionalisation of power relationships and of compromises that emerge from these struggles (page 51).

As this analysis develops, I hope it will focus on the [technological systems](#) by and through which the economy produces and consumes, and which place the heaviest burdens on ecological systems. The significance of these systems for consumption, and their relationship with economic and social systems, is constantly obscured by the stress placed by bourgeois economists and Malthusians alike on individual consumption, and by the obsession with [per capita consumption statistics](#), that Brand and Wissen mention (pages 17-18) but do not interrogate.

Brand and Wissen include a strong chapter on car-based transport, the technological system that has perhaps been most thoroughly critiqued over the years. They write (page 150) about the “key role” of the state in “establishing and normalising automobility” by building roads and subordinating other infrastructure to that; they argue that automobility’s “infrastructural, institutional and subjective entrenchment” is attributable not only to car companies but also to workers and their trade unions, who perceive restructuring as a “threat to their associational power”.

Further analysis of these relationships could consider suburbanisation, an expression of Fordism consciously promoted by US governments in the post-war boom and later encouraged in some European countries. The construction industry, as much as car makers, sought cities over which roads and parking spaces triumphed. Also important is the way that alternatives – very obvious, in the case of transport (trains, bikes, public transport and so on) – were undermined.

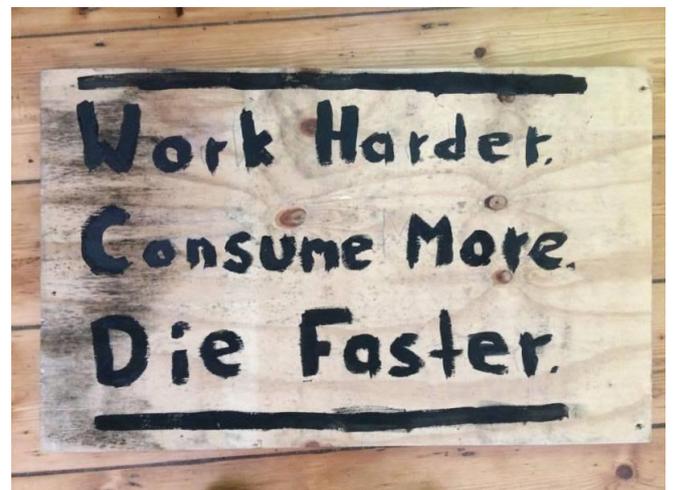
Living differently

It is axiomatic, to my mind, that moving towards socialism, and confronting the ecological crisis, will turn our everyday lives upside down. Brand and Wissen come at this firstly by

considering how the “imperial mode of living” makes us the people we are.

They write of a “societal generalisation” of the “imperial mode of living” in the global north, “where it had previously been reserved to the upper and upper-middle classes” (page 51). Obviously this does not mean that the entire population, or even a majority of the population, of rich countries are swimming in luxury. But it helps explain that we live in a way irrevocably different from the way working-class people in the capitalist centres lived in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and from the way people live in the global south.

Mountains of consumer products, of which the motor car is just the clearest example, are taken for granted – including by millions of impoverished people in rich countries with limited or no access to them. Even air travel has “shifted from an exclusive means of transport to a form of mass transit” (page 113) – without at all losing its class character, with much of the rich-country population not flying at all,



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while a tiny minority account for the vast bulk of air-kilometres. Brand and Wissen show how in China, “the new global centre of capital accumulation” (page 119) and other parts of the global south, hundreds of millions of people have joined the middle class and acquired “the possibility of a materially more comfortable life” (page 117).

The “reproduction of most of the population [of the global north] became dependent on functioning imperial relations”, through resource extraction, the globalisation of labour relations, through gender inequality and racism and colonialism, Brand and Wissen argue. But this way of living, “which often causes suffering and destruction elsewhere, is nonetheless not necessarily experienced as such” (page 53).

On the contrary, it often appears to expand people’s “scope of action”; for many people, “the imperial mode of living means the opportunity to have a subjectively fulfilled life”; the home appliances, industrialised food, cars and smartphones help to make life “liveable”, to broaden the spectrum of leisure activities and possible travel goals, and create real security, or at least a genuine sense of it, in potential crisis situations”.

All this impacts the way that we think, Brand and Wissen argue, using the concept of “hegemony” developed by Antonio Gramsci, and of “subjectivation” – which they define as the way in which “subjects” (we) “subordinate

themselves to domination”. Those that dominate do not just use naked force and oppression, but “instead draws on the wishes and desires of the populace”; subjectivation becomes part of individual identities; moreover, it is a process not only through which domination is produced and stabilised, but also through which it might be challenged.

Twentieth-century revolutions and Fordism

Central to Brand and Wissen’s argument about how the “imperial mode of living” developed is the idea of Fordism, which they define as an epoch of capitalist development starting in the US in the 1930s and flourishing between the 1950s and 1970s. The length of the working day “remained a central point of contention between labour and capital”, but “the struggle for a share in the abundance of commodities produced under capitalism moved into the foreground”. Productivity rose, and so did real wages; “people surrendered a potential increase in available disposable time for the opportunity to consume more” (pages 89-90).

A key element of this compromise between labour and capital was an abundance of commodities – very different, as Brand and Wissen correctly insist, from abundance in the sense of us living better, more fulfilling lives. However, I have two questions about their account of how this compromise was struck.

First, labour as an active historical subject plays too small a part in their historical account. Capitalism “produced its own adversary”, they write (page 88), in the form of “counter-movements” to its destructive tendencies. But they don’t assess the shattering impact on capitalism of the Russian revolutions of 1917, the German revolution of 1918



Earth Day, 1970

and the international wave of working-class action of which these were part. (British history in the 1920s, for example, was in many ways shaped by this wave.) In my view, it is impossible to understand Fordism without accounting for these hammer-blows under the impact of which it took shape (notwithstanding the fact that what Brand and Wissen call “the structural features of a (peripheral) Fordist mode of living” (page 95) were discernible in the Soviet Union not long after the revolution).

Second, and related to this, Brand and Wissen argue that the crisis of Fordism in the 1970s amounted to a “historic window of opportunity, during which the imperial mode of living was challenged” (page 101) – a window that then closed with the rise of neoliberalism and the new surge of capital accumulation that accompanied it. Fordism was challenged on multiple fronts, they write, including the first environmentalist warnings that capitalism would hit up

against the earth’s natural limits, such as the 1972 *Limits to Growth* report and the subsequent work of the UN Environment Programme. Again I felt that the dynamics of class struggle were missing from this account.

In my understanding, it was working-class resistance in the rich countries, culminating in the French general strike of 1968 and the Italian factory uprising of 1969, that forced capital to stoke inflation as a weapon against rising real wages. It was the Vietnam war and other anti-colonial struggles – to which the demands of Arab oil-producing nations for a greater share of oil riches were related – that shook the US imperial hegemony established in the 1950s. Neoliberalism was a reaction to all this.

Was there really a window of opportunity in which the juggernaut of expansion could have been halted? I wonder. Firstly, the conscious understanding that labour needed not only to take the wealth into its own hands, but also to overthrow the understanding of “wealth”, was almost non-existent. These problems were not only invisible in the discourse of almost all the political parties claiming to represent working-class interests (Communist, social democratic and even more radical groups), but were hardly heard in working-class movements more widely. The challenges to “economic growth” were marginal. Meaningful dialogue between environmentalist and labour movements, let alone joint action, was rare. (Movements over water use, forest access and pollution burdens, all manifestations of “ecologically unequal exchange”, only began to see themselves as “environmentalist” in the 1980s and 1990s. Juan Martinez-Alier wrote in *Environmentalism of the Poor* (page 14).)

Secondly, the global character of the rupture between human society and nature was not well understood. The greatest threat produced by capital expansion, of global heating caused by fossil fuel use, was not clearly appraised by scientists until the mid 1980s.

Thirdly, I reckon that history may show us that all these movements – of labour, of rich-country ecology, of “the environmentalism of the poor” – underestimated the sheer destructive power of our enemies, and capitalism’s ability to preserve and renew itself by means of the breakneck expansion that began in the 1980s.

Of course there are senses in which this all amounted to a “missed opportunity”. Probably the more important question is *why* the resistance to capitalism was so fragmentary.

A crisis of Marxism

Against the “imperial mode of living”, Brand and Wissen propose a “solidary mode of living”, which they describe as:

a very different – namely just, democratic, peaceful and truly ecological – model of prosperity, beyond capitalist, patriarchal and racist impositions, beyond the domination and exploitation of nature (page 193).

Further on:

The central normative reference point of critical analysis and emancipatory politics is a good life for all that does not destroy its own biophysical basis (page 195).

Any mode of living must do without externalisation, without exploiting other people and without destroying its own foundations.

Specifically, this means a drastic reduction in resource consumption and emissions, as well as the transformation of political, economic and social structures [...].

Brand and Wissen's discussion of how these changes will be achieved is frustratingly – and I suppose they would say, necessarily – vague. I agree that the approaches to economics and ecology developed by “degrowth” scholars must be built upon, and that “the future can never arise through a master plan” (page 190), but I would like to think we can be more definite than Brand and Wissen are about how it *can* arise.

They refer consistently to the idea of “great transformation”, following Karl Polanyi, and in their final chapter point to a “radical reformism”, and to “a gradual defeat of the imperial mode of living” via “conflicts and learning processes”. This kind of change will entail



Even air travel is for mass consumption

redistribution of power, income and wealth, and “implicitly or explicitly, challenge the ownership and control of the means of production” (page 196). In my view, the history of the twentieth century has much to teach us about the limitations of reformism, and indeed the limitations of revolutions; surely, Marxism as a body of thinking needs to engage with these.

I certainly don't have the answers to these questions ... although that is no reason to downplay their importance. Furthermore, I don't expect Brand, Wissen or anyone else to be able to supply the answers in a 220-page book. Their efforts to develop a Marxist analytical framework for understanding post-1980s capital accumulation, consumption, and ecological crisis, are very welcome. *The Imperial Mode of Living* will hopefully sharpen up discussion of Marxist approaches to social, economic and ecological crisis, much of which features crude, blunt and one-sided prejudices.

There may be a language issue here. Brand and Wissen refer to discussions in German social movements, and cite many scholars writing in German – work that, to be honest, I am not familiar with. I can say, though, that – while there are many Marxist writers publishing serious work on these issues in English – much of what is most widely publicised outside the universities does not even try to tackle the difficult dilemmas addressed by Brand and Wissen.

In the US, the widely-read *Jacobin* magazine eschews serious engagement with “degrowth” scholars, preferring cheap jibes, and promotes absurd versions of technological determinism. One of the oldest and best-resourced Marxist

journals, *Monthly Review* – blind to China's role as “the outstanding example of capitalist expansion and appropriation”, as Brand and Wissen remind us (page 119) – [embraces](#) Xi Jinping's sloganeering about “ecological civilisation”. Here in the UK, the editor of a significant left media outlet, Novara, [publishes](#) a paean to “fully automated luxury communism”, founded on ludicrously crude techno-optimism.

It would be surprising if the deep combination of crises through which we are living – social, economic and ecological – did not intensify the crisis of thinking by Marxists and others seeking to emancipate humanity from this nightmare. We need more thoughtful, constructive contributions of the kind that Brand and Wissen have made. *Simon Pirani, 20 September 2021.*

- Listen to [an interview with Markus Wissen on Bella Caledonia](#)
- Read notes from [a seminar on “historicising the imperial mode of living”](#)

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