

Review - Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis

Written by William K. Carroll

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WILLIAM K. CARROLL, NOV 22 2018

Global Capitalism, Global War, Global Crisis
By Andreas Bieler and Adam David Morton
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018

This book takes up three of the greatest challenges facing humanity today, in a highly readable analysis whose major theoretical contributions are belied by its title. Bieler and Morton begin their analysis with a spirited and well-argued defense of historical materialism against the tired charges of 'economism', which have always amounted to a caricature at odds with Marx's own analysis (though bearing a resemblance to the 'vulgar Marxism' Marx himself denounced). Noting that the current organic crisis and restructuring of global capitalism presents 'a necessarily historical materialist moment' (p.8), they ground their work in the philosophy of internal relations, presented as a radical, dialectical social ontology that 'focuses on internally related causes and conditions, rather than positing logically independent factors existing side by side' (p.9) as in predominantly positivist approaches in international relations and related fields.

This ontology is built around a dialectic of agency and structure in which 'production' is viewed in the broadest terms, so that the social relations of production 'refer to everyday patterns of behaviour involved in the production and consumption of physical goods as well as the discursive institutional and cultural tactics established to ensure the hegemony of existing social relations' (p.37). This generous conception of production enables Bieler and Morton to deliver a strong critique of social-constructivist and poststructural formulations, which disembed intersubjective ideas and discourse from the power-laden social relations in which they cohere, eschewing 'the internal relation of dominant discourses as material social processes' (p.64). Drawing primarily on Gramsci, their alternative recognizes ideas as material, and situates them, as a 'material structure of ideology', within social relations of production – enabling the identification of *who* wields power and *why* a certain set of ideas, rooted within these material relations, dominates at a particular point in time' (p.75).

After this ontological brush-clearing, in the book's middle part the authors take up several thematic considerations on uneven and combined development, geopolitics and class struggle. The analysis is wide-ranging and complex, deploying the full armamentum of Marxist political economy to good advantage; only a few insights can be telegraphed in the space available here. Trotsky's multilinear dialectic of uneven and combined development offers a view of state-formation trajectories as 'embedded in the *uneven* worldwide spread of capitalism *combined* with the condition of differently constituted preceding political forms and social relations' (p.96), setting the table, in many late-development contexts, for what Gramsci called the 'domesticated dialectic' of passive revolution: 'a working through of pre-established sovereignties that may both transform (revolution) and sustain (restoration) the change-inducing strains brought about by a transformation in social property relations' (p.105).

In their chapter on the geopolitics of global capitalism, Bieler and Morton reject the contrasting claims that the inter-state system has been replaced by a transnational state (TNS) and that the system continues to revolve around an informal American empire. Their case study of the Iraq War (Chapter 8) delves into the class fractions that divide US-based capital into a nationalist wing based predominantly in the military-industrial complex and oil industry and a globalist wing linked to non-military globalizing capital and representing the interests of a transnational capitalist class (TCC). It was the former, represented in the neoconservative Bush administration, which was likely to benefit

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from warfare in Iraq, compared to a globalist strategy of building international alliances to underwrite a stable global market. The war, then, was neither a project of a TNS operating through the US as an apparatus at the disposal of transnational capital (as in Robinson 2007), nor an assertion of US empire undergirded by a unified American capitalist class (as in Panitch and Gindin 2012). Rather, it was 'shaped more by a nationalist tendency within the US ruling class who were in a dominant position and were primary intellectuals of statecraft behind the invasion and subsequent reconstruction' (p.214). The Iraq War illustrates how, within a global political economy marked by uneven and combined development, class struggle occurs within state forms and concomitantly in an international field; hence researchers need to examine the extent to which the interests of transnational capital have been internalized in specific state forms, rather than take such eventualities for granted.

Turning in Chapter 6 to the emergent conditions of class struggle, Bieler and Morton mobilize Harry Cleaver's (1979) concept of the social factory as a means of broadening our conception of the social relations of production to include all the unwaged forms, outside the workplace, necessary for the reproduction of capital. Salient in the struggles of students, housewives, ethnic minorities, the unemployed, peasants etc., these forms are internally related through the contested process of social reproduction. Tracing the relations enables an analysis that refuses the exteriority of identity politics as well as the reduction of social struggles to a narrow concept of class. Emphasizing Silvia Federici's (2012: 122) claim that 'changing the conditions under which we reproduce ourselves is an essential part of our ability to create "self-reproducing movement"' (p.146), the authors draw an important strategic implication. Although 'capitalism is indifferent to social identities and exploits people regardless of their particular individualities,' nevertheless, 'capital may deploy social identities around race, nation or gender to fragment and divide class interests' (p.147). An appropriate response is 'to combatively articulate the tensions and connections between class, gender, race, sexuality and ecology without assuming these forms exist within anodyne and concordant unity' (p.155).

The book's third major part is comprised of three case studies: 1) the rise of the BRICS and particularly China within the new international division of labour, 2) the Iraq War of 2003 and its aftermath as an instance of the new 'bomb and build' imperialism (see above) and 3) the developing crisis of the Eurozone. The first study disputes the notion that China (and the BRICS more generally), offer an alternative to transnational neoliberalism, noting that within global capitalism China occupies a fragile location focused on the assembly of export products based on super-exploited labour. In my view, this assessment probably underestimates the dynamism of state capitalism in China, which the authors tacitly acknowledge in observing that China has become the world's second largest capital exporter, with a Belt and Road initiative set to give global capitalism a different spatial fix – hardly the province of a second-rate state-society complex. In the study of the post-2007 crisis in the Eurozone, state-centric institutionalist and Keynesian readings and prescriptions are critiqued for their failure to recognize the internal relations within which the export-driven German growth model and the debt-driven models of Europe's South have been co-constituted in a configuration of uneven and combined development. Indeed, this formulation of Trotsky's, along with key ideas from Gramsci and David Harvey (the latter pertaining to the dialectics of spatio-temporal restructuring) are put to good use in all three case studies.

A final chapter highlights both the spatial topography of global capitalism's organic crisis and the radicalized dialectic Bieler and Morton employ in their efforts to grasp it. Here they return to the theme of class struggle, not as a response to pre-given economic structure but as a variegated and co-constitutive dynamic internal to global capitalism, global war and global crisis, foregrounding struggles that flow 'from the violent appropriation of nature, territory, labour and the sphere of reproduction as a source of value creation and exploitation, especially regarding women's unpaid reproductive labour, as well as racial hierarchies resultant from colonial intervention'(p.253).

The book achieves an impressive synthesis of insights from several separate yet complementary perspectives within the wide compass of historical materialism, ranging from the classic contributions of Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg and most extensively, Gramsci, through New Left formulations (Perry Anderson, Harry Cleaver, Bertell Ollman, Nicos Poulantzas), to more recent contributions from Robert Cox, Silvia Federici, David Harvey, the Rethinking Marxism Collective and Ellen Wood. In critically appropriating and weaving these strands together, theoretically and empirically, Bieler and Morton have made a major contribution to social science. However, although they nod toward the importance of the internal relation between humanity and extra-human nature and briefly engage

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with Marxist political ecologists Andreas Malm and Jason Moore, the ecological aspect of their analysis is underdeveloped. They underestimate the grave implications of the already-evident climate catastrophe for global capitalism's unfolding hegemonic crisis, and for the future of humanity. Despite this shortcoming, this brilliant book merits a wide readership.

References

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Bill Carroll is Professor of Sociology at the University of Victoria and Co-director of the Corporate Mapping Project, a partnership of universities and civil-society organizations which traces modalities of corporate power and resistance within the global political economy, focusing on fossil capital. His research interests include the political economy/ecology of corporate capitalism, social movements and social change, and critical social theory and method. Among his books are *Organizing the 1%: How Corporate Power Works* (2018, with J.P. Sapinski), *Expose, Oppose, Propose: Alternative Policy Groups and the Struggle for Global Justice* (2016), *A World to Win: Contemporary Social Movements and Counter-Hegemony* (2016, with Kanchan Sarker), *The Making of a Transnational Capitalist Class* (2010), *Remaking Media* (2006, with Bob Hackett), *Corporate Power in a Globalizing World* (2004) and *Critical Strategies for Social Research* (2004).