

New forms, old problems

Colin Mooers, *Imperial Subjects: Citizenship in an Age of Crisis and Empire*, Bloomsbury, London, 2014. 152 pp., £14.99 pb., 978 1 44116 493 3.

This is a small book on the inner connections of global capitalism, the imperial system, and the form and content of contemporary liberal citizenship. Through the prism of ‘imperial subjects’ – conceived as a global if variegated condition stretching unevenly across the entire range of powerful and weaker social formations of the world system – Colin Mooers hopes to offer ‘the temporary simplification and distillation of complex social realities in order to comprehend them more deeply’. Taking a cue from Fredric Jameson, this is a bold effort to cognitively map the totalizing power of capitalist social relations in the contemporary international conjuncture.

Imperial Subjects is one of the few major contributions to Marxist theories of imperialism of late which integrally incorporates the global South into its basic analytical apparatus. The Middle East, for example, features here as much more than a simple reservoir of oil, or the territorial backdrop of imperial war. Likewise, in the stirring concluding chapter on resistance and contestation, Mooers homes in on Latin America. He manages a subtle balance in his treatment of the region, seeing it as perhaps the most crucial site of social and political Left experimentation in the neoliberal era, while recognizing the strict limits of new centre-left regimes and refusing any crude romanticism.

Much of twenty-first-century Marxist literature on the ‘new imperialism’ has returned in the first instance – whether it be in a mode of repudiation, appropriation or rearticulation – to the classic texts of Lenin, Bukharin, Kautsky and Luxemburg. Mooers goes further back, preferring, above all, the method of dialectical inquiry on offer in the materials of Marx himself. The arc of chapter 1 masterfully carries the reader through Marx’s treatments of primitive accumulation, the commodity form and commodity fetishism, and money and social abstraction, before forging links between these themes and the ideology of liberal citizenship (the ‘citizenship illusion’), and the always racialized and gendered character of class – concrete labour is understood to be ‘embodied in the fullest sense of the term’ and the ‘myriad

humiliations and degradations of racism and sexism’ are understood as constitutive elements of contemporary capitalism, rather than mere afterthoughts to which hand-wavy gestures are necessary.

A holistic theory of contemporary citizenship must refuse at the outset the common tendency to separate its content from its form. After all, the specific kinds of rights embodied in liberal capitalist democracies today – their content – have everything to do with limits imposed by the imperatives of capitalism as a system – their form. If bourgeois political economists mistook the dynamics of the capitalist mode of production for production in general, mainstream theories of citizenship ‘seek to reify the bourgeois citizenship form as the *sine qua non* of human freedom’. Abstraction, meanwhile, is necessary for teasing out the inner connections of global capitalism and imperialism because their forms of appearance, seen from any individual vantage point, conceal their essential relations and processes, their underlying laws of motion, all of which are necessary for their reproduction at the systemic level. The subject, then, must be the totality of capitalism as a whole, and the specific forms assumed by imperialism and citizenship within that totality.

Following on the trail forged by one of his main intellectual mentors, Ellen Meiksins Wood, in *Empire of Capital* (2003), Mooers points to the analogous historical relationship between the distinct domestic social property relations of different dominant states in the world system over time and their forms of imperial rule, between the operation and expansion of the domestic social relations of capitalism particularly and the externalization of capital through capitalist imperialism. The empirical record demonstrates that there has been a tight historical association between both non-capitalist and capitalist societies, on the one hand, and their imperialisms, on the other. Non-capitalist colonial empires of the past – such as the Portuguese and Spanish empires in Latin America between the late fifteenth and early nineteenth centuries – like feudal lords in their relations with peasants, dominated territory and subjects through

military conquest, often direct political rule, and therefore extensive extra-economic coercion; in contrast, capitalist imperialism over time is increasingly dominated by non-territorial, market-based forms of coercion. This is part of what makes it possible to say that we continue to live in a world dominated by imperial relations, despite the vast processes of formal decolonization in much of Africa and Asia. It does not follow that capitalist imperialism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries dispensed with the need for coercive force, as any casual perusal of the daily newspapers in the present will attest. Indeed, as Mooers suggests, 'force remains indispensable both to the achievement of market "openness" where it does not yet exist and to securing ongoing compliance with the rights of capital'.

Another central theoretical edifice of the text, the ostensible separation of the economic and the political under capitalism, also draws on Wood, this time from her *Democracy against Capitalism* (1995). 'The liberal subject of modern capitalist citizenship, which emerged in the most developed capitalist societies', Mooers writes, 'was shaped by the separation between economics and politics made possible by primitive accumulation. And although the actual form of this separation has varied widely depending on the historical configuration of class forces in different societies, in its "classic form" this separation has been key to the coexistence of civic equality alongside class inequality'. Mooers notes how under liberal capitalism, formal democracy, civil rights and liberties, and representative governments simultaneously signify an improvement on less democratic political forms of rule, while also limiting 'the substance of these rights in ways which make them compatible with the rule of capital'. Mooers's critical distance from Wood and many other 'political Marxists' on matters of coercive labour forms under capitalism allows him to recognize that certain labour forms which are in appearance pre-capitalist can be, and have been, incorporated into the logic of capitalism (formal subsumption of labour to capital). 'Historically speaking, capitalism has been quite promiscuous', Mooers notes, 'in its ability to coexist with and eventually conquer a variety of forms of surplus-extraction from slavery to handicraft and small-scale peasant production'. Analogously, although non-territorial and market-based forms of coercion are the dominant processes in contemporary capitalist imperialism, combinations of formal, territorial settler-colonialism and informal, market-based imperialism continue to exist in places such as Palestine, and in aspects of indigenous

peoples' relationships to states and settlers in much of the Americas. Unfortunately, Mooers's acumen is at times undermined, such as when he slips into presenting the tenets of formal liberal democracy as constitutive of the 'civic forms more appropriate to capitalism'. Implicit in such slippage is the writing out of the history of global capitalism the fused character of the political and economic in many, if not most, postcolonial capitalist states until late in the twentieth century in Asia, Africa and Latin America. A cursory look at China since the 1980s, moreover, calls into question any straightforward association of liberal civic forms as the ideal-typical mode of capitalist rule, or any simple separation of economics and politics. There is also something of a tension, here, in his defence of the separation of the economic and political as conceived by Wood, and his critique of dual-logic approaches to contemporary capitalist imperialism.

Having sketched the specificities of capitalist imperialism, Mooers moves on to an exploration of their neoliberal expression over the last several decades. The uneven international unfolding of neoliberalism since the capitalist crisis of the mid-1970s has involved at its core the construction of 'lean citizenship', in which the production and reproduction of 'flexible', 'mobile' and 'agile' workforces are defining features. The collapse of the Soviet bloc necessitated a parallel transformation in imperialist language across the ideological plane. If the pliable category 'Communist' could conveniently envelop good parts of twentieth-century movements of resistance, the events of 9/11 allowed for a novel successor – the War on Terror and a new ideal bogeyman. The almost infinitely malleable threat of terrorism has allowed the possibility of imperial war freed of any anachronistic limits on its temporality or geography. The theatre of this latest war is endless and everywhere. In the global North, the lean worker of neoliberalism has been merged with the perpetually frightened and anxious citizen of the epoch of terror. Under an increasingly militarized neoliberalism, long-existing liberal civic rights – 'freedoms of movement, speech, association, privacy, and in some European states, religion' – are circumscribed in the historical-geographic core of capitalism, while 'humanitarian interventions' transform swathes of the global South into literal war-fields and laboratories of coerced market fundamentalism.

In the core middle sections of the text, Mooers attempts to hash out in more detail the 'relationship between the basic dynamics of capitalism and

imperialism', which draws him more squarely into a series of debates on the 'new imperialism'. Drawing on David Harvey, the historical point of departure here is one of capitalism's actual uneven geographical development over time, whereas the founding theoretical premiss is that the 'capitalist circulation process requires that more and more aspects of social and natural life across the planet be subjected to its logic'. Individual capitalists are compelled by the imperatives of competitive accumulation to perpetually reinvest and expand their operations, or risk being snowed under by their competitors. This means a compulsion to deepen or intensify capitalist social relations, by perpetually drawing into the orbit of commodification everything from 'hand soap to health care, from land to leisure time and from human affect to the human genome'. The same systemic imperatives that lead capitalists to intensify capitalist social relations also motivate them to drive outwards in spatial terms, and to constantly reduce the temporal distance between locations – Marx's annihilation of space through time. The endless quest for new geographical terrains of accumulation is one expression, therefore, of capitalism's need to 'expand the range and nature of things which can be commodified'. 'Mature capitalism', Mooers argues, 'is inevitably imperialist; the outward push of capital, its search for new geographical sources of accumulation, is an inbuilt feature of the system'.

Rather than starting with a blank canvas, capitalist laws of motion emerged historically in and through an international system of states inherited from feudal society. The uneven geographical concentration of centres of capital accumulation locked in competition with one another has tended over time towards the mobilization of different national states in defence of the interests of national- or region-based capitals. Naturally, explaining the dynamics of inter-imperial rivalry – or, alternatively, moves towards inter-imperial cooperation and ultra-imperialism – across different historical epochs has been a mainstay of Marxist theories of imperialism since their origin. Mooers recounts how in order to avoid some of the pitfalls of the economic reductivism to be found in Bukharin's and Lenin's theories of imperialism, some of today's contributors, such as Harvey and Alex Callinicos, have sought to account properly for the dialectical relationship between the geopolitical competition and rivalry between states and the expansionary and competitive dynamics of capitalism. In so doing they have independently formulated similar dual-logic approaches to the

dynamics of the imperial system today – the separate but interacting logics of capitalism and territoriality, or economics and geopolitics.

While acknowledging that the dual-logics approach of Harvey and Callinicos 'has the advantage of not reducing imperialist rivalry between states or groups of states as always directly involving economic interest as well as allowing for the vagaries of political and military decision-making in different contexts', Mooers correctly emphasizes that these advantages are only worthwhile 'provided that the "internal relation" between economics and politics is not jettisoned in the process'. To the extent that dual-logics approaches to imperialism mean 'assigning *completely* separate logics to the state and capital' they fall into a neo-Weberian trap. This is perhaps where Mooers missed the opportunity to further interrogate the strengths and limits of Wood's separation of the economic and political. Nonetheless, Mooers's general conclusions on rivalry are much closer to Harvey and Callinicos than to, say, Sam Gindin and Leo Panitch in *The Making of Global Capitalism* (2013), or William I. Robinson in *A Theory of Global Capitalism* (2004). Expressing different twenty-first century iterations of Kautsky's basic theses on ultra-imperialism, for Gindin and Panitch, the US continues to rule over an uncontested empire in the interest of global capital in general, while for Robinson the key agents of the current period are a new transnational capitalist class and an incipient transnational state. Any focus on inter-imperial competition misses the forest for the trees for such thinkers. Although oddly avoiding explicit engagement with their work, Mooers draws sharply divergent conclusions:

While the deployment of US military might is the most attention-grabbing aspect of the new imperialism, imperialist rivalry *between* states and economic blocs is just as important, even if such competition remains for a time latent. Imperialist rivalry is the product of *systemic* imperatives resulting from competitive accumulation between different units of capital within a plural states system. The fact that no single nation-state or group of states, however powerful, can police the entire global economy means that military power and warfare will remain a key feature of the imperial system.

There are sound empirical reasons to believe, parallel to Mooers's basic line of inquiry, that processes of global accumulation lead to territorial and geographic concentrations of investment, markets and labour in specific paces of the world economy – concentrations of capital which privilege certain

areas at the expense of others and which tend to be reinforced over time. It also makes historical and theoretical sense to argue that while for a time a global hegemon may be able to act in the general interests of various imperial states, under global capitalism inbuilt processes of competitive accumulation and conflict, organized territorially into unevenly powerful states, are bound to lead to novel forms of confrontation and rivalry. As Mooers acknowledges, this need not mean the inevitability of imminent war between the most powerful inter-imperial rivals.

On theoretical and historical grounds, then, Mooers is on much more stable ground than the new theorists of ultra-imperialism. Unfortunately,

Mooers only very cursorily translates his logical abstractions into much of an empirical defence of their credibility in the present moment. Indeed, when Mooers does wade into the messy empirics of the conjuncture – as in his discussion of the motivations behind, and results of, the Iraq War – the narrative occasionally drifts into contradiction and ambiguity. It still remains necessary, therefore, to carry Mooers's impressive theoretical syntheses and advances into a series of much more concrete and historically grounded investigations of the different forms assumed by capitalist imperialism over the long history of capitalist modernity, all the way to the present.

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Palaver

Gabriel Rockhill, *Radical History and the Politics of Art*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2014. 274 pp., £58.50 hb., £19.50 pb., 978 0 23115 200 6 hb., 978 0 23115 201 3 pb.

In 2006 an anonymous group of Art History PhD students published the first and only issue of *November*, an academic-looking journal whose cover bore the droll heading 'Art, Theory, Criticism, Palaver'. As was immediately obvious from its design, the target of this parody was *October*, the New York-based publication which spun off from *Artforum* in 1976 to become the most prominent US venue for the reception of post-modernist art and certain strains of post-structuralist theory. Between its sometimes haughty avant-gardism, the relatively rigid character of its aesthetic programme, and the various doctrinal mannerisms of its core contributors, *October* more or less invited the sort of satire it received in *November*, which concluded with a 'Round Table' discussion (an *October* staple) dedicated to the merits of the tables used in Ivy League seminar rooms.

Although one could dismiss this incident as a sophomoric prank – or deem *October*, which has changed little in the interim, to be largely outmoded – this would overlook a set of theoretical, discursive and institutional problems in which the journal is currently enmeshed. This problematic might best be grasped as the hegemony of a certain model of critical art theory whose key concepts have been consolidated almost to the point of reification. Within this readymade analytic, relations between art and politics are bound to conform to one of a small group of pre-approved theoretical formulas – namely, the versions of Marxism, psychoanalysis and

post-structuralism that have been used to compile the canon of officially 'critical' art history, together with whatever emergent theories and practices are deemed worthy of this legacy.

If this approach reduces history to a kind of vanguardist catechism, it also ontologizes art and politics such that they become answers to be uncovered, rather than questions to be voiced or positions to be contested. As Grant Kester has incisively argued, such an approach limits criticism to a kind of subcontracting operation whose central feature isn't independent analysis, but the citation of whichever master discourse best reveals (and legitimates) the criticality of the artwork (not to mention the critic). In a moment when 'criticality' is often invoked to offset the ever more ludicrous excesses of the art market, criticism finds itself both in more demand and at increased risk. Those who value critique as an end in itself, thereby overlooking its new-found power to amplify exchange value, are especially susceptible to instrumentalization.

Within such a conjuncture, one welcomes ambitious, iconoclastic work like Gabriel Rockhill's *Radical History and the Politics of Art*. Rockhill's book aims to thoroughly rethink the concepts that typically structure discussions of art and politics, beginning with 'art' and 'politics'. Rather than define these terms from first principles, Rockhill argues that such operations hypostatize art and politics, mistaking contingent properties for invariant essences. In doing