

Book Review Forum

Darren Byler, *Terror Capitalism: Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2022. ISBN: 978-1-4780-1764-6 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4780-1502-4 (cloth) ISBN: 978-1-4780-2226-8 (ebook)

Recent attention to dispossession as a central, ongoing feature of capitalism and theoretical concern tend to split between descriptive, often normatively-inflected engagements and insightful, if highly abstract critical appraisals (Hart 2006). Both approaches have productively extended understandings of dispossession beyond its initial focus on land to consider racialization and subject formation. At the same time, much of the scholarship continues to operate at a high level of abstraction. For all the attention to cataloging the numerous ways and places where dispossession occurs, very little of that work delves into how dispossession works concretely, what it produces, and how it is perpetuated. *Terror Capitalism* demonstrates one way of addressing those concerns by centering the experiences of the dispossessed. The result is rewarding on any number of levels, offering a relational account of dispossession that foregrounds the intersection and layered processes of capitalism, colonialism, and state power.

Byler's ethnographic account of Uyghur dispossession addresses several key points. Among them is the way it demonstrates China's turn towards capital accumulation. Returning to Rosa Luxemburg, that process rests on the ability to extract value from people and places whose mode of production is not capitalistic. While Luxemburg's analysis specifically addressed imperialism's dependency on the colonies, recent works have expanded that analysis to chart multiple "outsides" mapped by consumption, social reproduction, and social life in general (e.g. Cavallero and Gago 2021). Byler adds to that conversation in drawing attention to the concrete conditions that capitalist accumulation depends on and works through. Land is central to this discussion, captured in Byler's account of Uyghur dispossession by industrial agriculture and its coerced proletarianization. By working ethnographically, Byler demonstrates how the theft of land is just the beginning. More than the destruction of ways of life, his account demonstrates

how dispossession constitutes a new social order whose attendant forms of identification are marked by new forms of dependency and inequality. Displacement of Uyghurs by industrial agriculture, the arrival of new communication technologies such as televisions and smart phones, and the state construction of re-education camps are therefore all linked events in an ongoing process of dispossession. Each is experienced as a simultaneous expansion of domination across social life signaled by repeated enclosures that constrain the prospects for Uyghur existence.

Of these forms of dispossession, *Terror Capitalism*'s discussion of "digital enclosure" stands out. Byler uses the term to highlight the translation of social interactions into streams of data that can be used to devalue, define, and discipline Uyghur sociality. His analysis gets at a question that has vexed efforts to theorize digital life—smart phones, in particular. Not only does every user become an agent in the devaluation of their labor as producers of data. They also contribute to building the apparatuses that both define the value of their future labor and set the terms of their relationship to the Chinese state. The latter is carried out in multiple ways, drawing on a range of "data janitors" (the phrase is Lilly Irani's [2015]) who train algorithms to recognize and digitize objects (p.47) to Uyghur police contractors conscripted to break up families, spy on neighbors, friends, and each other while policing their own individual actions in order to avoid being branded as "extremist" by the algorithms. Still others are encouraged to produce "Uyghur" works of criticism, art, and culture that both model acceptable behavior and further train state efforts to identify extremist positions. And then there's the enforced watching of state-run media on TV, an activity whose refusal can be construed as one of the 75 signs of extremist behavior. This is powerfully dystopian stuff, covered over by a fateful combination of the normalization of Chinese authoritarianism, the racialization of Muslims as a universal enemy, and lack of access for foreigners like Byler. It bears noting that Byler's published account all but guarantees that he will never be allowed to return, a minor dispossession of the text's claims about friendship as a form of refusal.

Byler's ethnographic approach further manages to address how dispossession is refused and contested, an element that is so often missing in accounts from Marx on. One of Marx's (1853) earliest engagements with the concept notes the "misery of the Hindu" that arises from their forcible separation from Hindustan and "all its ancient traditions" and "the whole of its past

history” by Britain. Whether that assessment is due to Marx’s limited sourcing or the kind of Orientalist view prevalent in the “West” at the time is the subject of other works. What matters here is how it sets up the dispossessed as the victims bearing the “loss of ... [an] old world, with no gain of a new one” (Marx 1853). The centering of the dispossessed shows the experience of capitalism to be one of abandonment, death, and exile, directly countering Chinese state claims of bringing progress. The move adds specificity to the claim that dispossession dominates Uyghur relationships to the state. It also allows Byler to link Uyghur struggles with those of Indigenous peoples elsewhere. That characterization challenges the China’s prohibition on using the term “indigenous” to refer to any populations living within its sovereign borders. Byler extends his analysis by drawing on settler colonialism to characterize a social structure defined by the advantages conferred to Han settlers and the eventual disappearance of the Uyghur life. The framing repeats critiques of settler colonialism’s emphasis on structure (as opposed to process) that preemptively constrains Native resistance to a refusal to disappear and is often inattentive to how it unfolds differently, in different places, at different times.

Here Byler’s engagement is more uneven. As much as the text uses settler colonialism to characterize Han Chinese presence in Xinjiang, its attention to the specifics of location and setting pushes against uses of the term as a transhistorical, translocal structure with his attention to the specificities of Uyghur life. What’s more, one of the central arguments he makes concerns the ability to fashion new forms of sociality under these conditions, attentive to how they both transform what it means to be Uyghur while refusing to disappear. As much as that critical engagement features in the text, the ambivalence with regard to settler colonialism is not addressed as directly as it might seem. Matters are further complicated by the discussion of *yerlik*, a Uyghur word for “Native” used to evade Chinese prohibitions on “indigenous”. Uyghurs living outside of China have increasingly used the terms as synonyms, presumably to render their plight legible in terms of international Indigenous rights, using one racialized regime to challenge another. Yet unlike Tibetans who have selectively used the term, if not eschewing it outright, Uyghur appeals to indigeneity are complicated—one might even say devalued—by more modern aspects of their life that includes Islam and urban living. Those politics are beyond

the immediate focus of the text, surfacing briefly in the text (p.81-82) and in the notes (p.236, n.10-11), opening questions for further enquiry.

The adequacy of settler colonialism as an analytic for understanding Chinese presence in Xinjiang does nothing to detract from *Terror Capitalism*. Rather, it reinforces the importance of engaging with its historical and geographically situated account of dispossession. That account is but one of many contributions that *Terror Capitalism* makes to scholarly and political debates in any number of fields. These comments presented here take up one thread of that debate in the sincere hope that it will lead to more engagement with *Terror Capitalism*.

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