

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)

Theories of racial capitalism are having a moment. Rooted in the early 20th century writing of W.E.B. Du Bois and further specified by Cedric Robinson in the 1980s, this line of theorization has made its way into the heart of several disciplines only in recent years. The racial capitalism framework has been immensely productive, both analytically and practically, in identifying the historical origins and ongoing co-constitution of racialized social hierarchy and economic exploitation and dispossession. While this has been a breath of fresh air and an important corrective to reductionists of various kinds, the research has been overwhelmingly, if understandably, focused on the Euro-American colonial encounter and its afterlives. As Euro-America's dominance of the global capitalist system has clearly declined from its zenith in the 19th and 20th centuries, we must raise the question: how can we understand the process and contours of racialization in an increasingly Asia-centered capitalism?

Darren Byler's *Terror Capitalism* is many things—a critique of global counterterrorism, a careful ethnographic reading of gender politics, an urgent exposé of the social consequences of comprehensive digital surveillance—but it is also one of the first major statements on racial capitalism in the emergent empire of 21st century China. He is careful, both in this book and in other writing, to draw attention to the way terror capitalism in Northwest China is not independent from, but indeed presupposed by and interwoven with, Euro-American empire and its attendant organization of global supply chains, surveillance technologies, and of course counterterrorism and Islamophobia. And yet, Byler also attends to the historical and social specificity of China's Indigenous enclosure, dispossession, and *subtraction*, “a term that describes the general process of urban banishment, epistemic erasure, and unfree labor that typified the effects of terror capitalism”. We see in *Terror Capitalism* that while anti-Muslim

racism and the settler-colonial project in Northwest China predate the country's more recent turn to capitalism, capital has eagerly seized upon and indeed remade these forms of social difference.

There is no question that the Uyghurs have been subjected to an unrelenting and multi-dimensional assault on all features of social life, and Byler's book is perhaps the single best ethnographic account of the emergence of this system (unfortunately it may be the last one too). But before reading the book I had maintained some skepticism about the centrality of this human rights catastrophe for Chinese capitalism *in general*. Certainly, Uyghurs' land can be dispossessed more easily, and they can be subjected to forms of labor exploitation and control that would be unacceptable for the dominant Han population. And yet, Uyghurs constitute a tiny fraction of China's 1.4 billion people—how significant could this minority population in a remote corner of the country really be for understanding Chinese capitalism?

If we only look at the total economic value extracted from Uyghur labor, it is significant in certain labor-intensive industries, notably cotton, textiles, and garments. But this labor is not exactly a lynchpin for the economy as was the case with enslaved Black and Indigenous labor in the Americas. Following from this assessment, the state-sanctioned racism directed at Uyghurs would seem to be a grotesque human rights violation, but not a core feature of Sino-centric capitalism.

In fact, *Terror Capitalism* reveals that we cannot measure the centrality of Uyghur oppression simply in terms of volumes of capital extracted. Rather, we must be attuned to the kinds of technologies—both literal and metaphorical—that are developed and refined in the settler-colonial context of Northwest China and then deployed at scale in the metropole and beyond. This dynamic is most apparent in Byler's discussion of digital enclosure, a process whereby private corporations capitalized on non-voluntary data harvesting from Uyghurs and other Muslims, justified with reference to the security demands of the People's War on Terror. Chinese tech firms were gifted a population that they could experiment on without concern for privacy, legal protections, or human rights concerns. This allowed companies to develop cutting-edge technology with AI-driven analysis of coercively gathered surveillance data. Indeed, Byler chillingly notes that Uyghurs can land themselves in trouble simply by *not* using a cellphone or social media: lack of a digital footprint is presumed to be nefarious. By some measures, China

has become the global leader in the growth industry of policing technology, and this breakthrough in profitability would not have been possible without the racialization and subjugation of the Uyghurs.

It is not only that profitable businesses have emerged from terror capitalism, but also new systems of control. Reading Byler's depictions of digital surveillance and enclosure today is haunting, as Xi Jinping's "Zero Covid" policy resulted in some of these technologies coming to dominate *all* spheres of social life in the PRC. Things that were first deployed on Uyghurs, including facial recognition, mandatory cell phones, and endless checkpoints, became the norm in urban China for everyone amid intense pandemic control measures. This should not be confused for equivalency, as urban Han people are not being sent to re-education camps and they retain much more individual and cultural autonomy than do Uyghurs. Nonetheless, the colonial technologies of control have infiltrated the metropole, the racism has leaked out of the camps and increasingly subjugates everyone within an encompassing regime of economically profitable surveillance. In other words, the primitive accumulation of data filched from the bodies, movements, and words of the Uyghurs served as the cornerstone of an entire regime of accumulation and control that is only now coming into full view. By rooting his study in the racialized space of Northwest China in the 2010s, Byler was able to detect this monstrous dynamic before its full implications were revealed to Han China.

I can only hope that scholars studying "China proper" will not relegate these findings to the periphery. Critical studies of China's labor regimes have covered much ground over the past generation but are largely blind to forms of social division other than gender and *hukou* (place-based difference). While the significance of these social problems is undeniable, taking seriously the PRC's settler colonialism and emergent social organization of racial capitalism is *not* peripheral; it is in fact remaking the system as a whole. As just one pertinent example, the "closed loop" labor regimes that have been deployed everywhere from the Olympic Village to Foxconn and Tesla are a clear outgrowth of the encompassing and unfree labor systems deployed in the camps. Again, we must be careful not to equate the two, for being racially subordinated carries with it risks and traumas many magnitudes greater than what working-class Han people experience. The point rather is that, absent social struggle, the violence associated with

subjugation of one group inevitably will infiltrate the broader polity. The aim of critical inquiry ought to be to draw lines of connection between these uneven but linked forms of oppression, to delineate shared interests and sites of resistance.

This extension to Han China is not Byler's concern, and indeed I think it is clearly beyond the purview of the book. He is, however, acutely aware of the broader implications of the work, as he concludes, "...the central argument of *Terror Capitalism* is that the subtraction of Uyghur society is one frontier of a global social system" (p.228). He gestures to how anti-terrorism has facilitated similar forms of control and exploitation in places such as Kashmir and Palestine. But despite growing animosity between China and the US (as well as India), it seems as though anti-Muslim racism is one thing these increasingly hostile imperial powers can agree on. In such a context, official American denunciations of Uyghur oppression and PRC calls for a just solution in Palestine ring hollow. At the risk of conceptual stretching, might we suggest that a global terror capitalism *consensus* has endured despite (or because of) intensifying geopolitical hostility? Will China's version of terror capitalism, its technologies and governing logics, come to supersede that of Euro-American empire, and to what effect? These are just some of the profound and likely unanswerable questions that this brilliant work of scholarship has left me with.

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