

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)

Introduction

How is terror produced, multiplied, and survived? Terror is an evocative concept, and it is deliberately deployed in the ethnography *Terror Capitalism: Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City* to capture various historical processes and ongoing dimensions of dispossession and enclosure in China's northwest region of Xinjiang. Terror operates in multiple registers throughout the book: it is a political feature of settler colonial governance and global commodity chains; the specter of the Muslim terrorist catalyzes the racialization of ethnicity and justifies new forms of dispossession; terror is an embodied experience of those whose lives are subject to public–private data harvesting and mass detention. At its heart, the book ethnographically foregrounds the perspectives of those navigating the often opaque but nonetheless palpable predatory technologies of surveillance developed and experimented on Uyghur populations.

Just after its publication, I began incorporating the book in my undergraduate seminars in New York City on the anthropology of capitalism, during the second parts of the semester that move through a different ethnography each week. The students were still masked due to the ongoing pandemic, but they were eager for the face-to-face (or rather, eye-to-eye) connection and in-person discussion after the countless, numbing hours of video muting and unmuting on Zoom in previous semesters. The students hailed from both from the United States and abroad, including the PRC, and their working knowledge on the topic included general awareness of Uyghur re-education camps from soundbites in international news and social media over the past decade, which often foregrounded Chinese state suppression of ethnic minorities and Islamophobic logics as explanations.

Thus, the ensuing seminar conversations engaged this pre-existing preliminary knowledge, while systematically introducing a range of new analytics, in an additive fashion: settler colonialism + ethnonationalism + racial capitalism + feminist critique + the Global War on Terror/counterterrorism industry + surveillance capitalism. Parsing each out in dry erase marker, in lists and webs that crisscrossed the whiteboards, we mapped how each analytic brings together different timelines, actors, institutions, and geographies that are both comparative (i.e. across settler-colonial contexts) and interlinked (i.e. transnational militarized Islamophobia; the global growth of surveillance technologies). In classical social scientific fashion, the sum of all these components exceeds its individual parts, resulting in an overarching conceptual framework of “terror capitalism” that considers the three major processes of material dispossession, ethnoracialized devaluation, and digital enclosure taking place on China’s western frontier.

This forum is composed of four reviews that engage key interventions of the book in the anthropology of capitalism, feminist and decolonial critique, and the geopolitical rise of “global China”, while posing critical questions for curious readers. As Eli Friedman asks, for example, how does a small minoritized population in a remote region of China illuminate important contours of the machinations of contemporary capitalism? The answer lies in pushing forth new ways of thinking about capitalist value beyond simply that of labor or resource extraction. As Friedman shows, the book demonstrates how Uyghur containment is a process of experimental refinement of surveillance technologies, ethnoracial definition, and material dispossession, that can be (and is) later expanded from its initial settler-colonial context to reach the metropole and beyond. Indeed, while the book was written before the onset of the pandemic, *Terror Capitalism* is acutely attuned to processes that were well on their way and emerged to drastic effect during Xi’s “zero Covid” policy, rapidly reaching across all of China’s domestic population, as my students were well aware of while reading the book.

Madiha Tahir acutely considers what it means to bring a transnational feminist lens to the geopolitical and technopolitical terrain, noting the complex and at times troubled relationship between anti-colonial mobilizations and patriarchal renderings of tradition. Strikingly, Tahir additionally considers how value in the new surveillance economy is produced through the formation of data subjects, who serve as important experimental populations through gendered

and ethnoracialized processes of digital containment. Indeed, building on literature on primitive accumulation and enclosures as an *ongoing*, not precursory, requirement of capitalism, Joe Bryan interrogates how the book's intersecting analytics of settler colonialism and capitalist accumulation illuminate the process of digital enclosure in a longer history and pattern of dispossession. In this context, forming friendships and establishing relationships becomes a politicized act, or a "minor politics of refusal", that is both a survival strategy and creates new forms of digital consciousness around both Muslim and "native" identities. As Tanzeen Rashed Doha highlights, homosocial friendships of Uyghur men in the book are formed as strategies of social reproduction, affective resistance, and survival "from the abyss of death" in the face of enclosure, devaluation, and subtraction of Uyghur social life.

While deeply rooted in the contemporary Chinese context, the book notes that area studies frames often overemphasize nationalist historiographies and boundaries at the expense of transnational connection; that is, just as capital and commodities in contemporary global economic systems move across and through national borders, so too do their political effects, ideological entanglements, and social consequences. Such insights are generated by deep ethnographic engagement in Xinjiang, but as Tahir notes in this forum, its theoretical scope "reveals the multiscalar, transnational entanglements through which China (and other states) realize their particular geopolitical projects". As an academic engaged in the burgeoning "China–Africa" studies in the past decade, that has been mired in a series of complex debates around researcher positionality and the politics of critique, I appreciate Byler's ability to take theoretical and political impasses head-on; Han Chinese citizens can *both* be subjects of Western racism while *also* participating in and generating new institutions of ethnoracialized and Islamophobic subjugation of domestic minorities. China can *both* have a history of global anti-colonial identification *and also* instrumentalize such histories as rhetorical shields from criticism of contemporary settler projects.

In this sense, the book meticulously threads a careful line of both insisting on the particularities and historicity of Uyghur positionality in contemporary China, while also situating these phenomena in a broader geography of transnational processes of racial capitalism and settler colonialism:

Framing the political and economic stakes of Uyghur colonization as a frontier of global capitalism rather than as a manifestation of tyrannical state communism or Asian despotism, as it is often framed by xenophobic North American politicians, also works to refuse a revival of Cold War binarisms. Instead, it shows how the rhetoric of the Global War on Terror and the force of global capitalism come together to create forms of dispossession in new locations. (p.xii-xiii)

The concept of ethnoracialization, foregrounded by Byler throughout the book, neatly exemplifies this commitment to simultaneous domestic–transnational analysis. That is, ethnicity is not simply a static or primordial identity but one that is generated through colonial and capitalist encounter to generate value by accentuating difference and justifying institutionalized systems of hierarchy as biological, cultural, and natural.

As the reviews of this forum note, this book is a moving read. Beyond its extremely clear contributions to academic conversations around capitalist theories of value, global counterterrorism, geographies of settler colonialism and racial capitalism, ethnoracialization in non-Western contexts, feminist and decolonial studies, and the anthropology of geopolitics, *Terror Capitalism's* ethnographic approach constantly anchors these vast processes in the tangible and moving accounts of friendships, inter-ethnic witnessing, and practices of care, that illuminate the stakes of it all: the erosion and subtraction of contemporary Uyghur social life.

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