Book Review:

Uncovering the Hidden Cost of Capitalism: Insights from the *Imperial Mode of Living*

Nilay Barlas*

***Imperial Mode of Living: Everyday Life and Ecological Crisis of Capitalism* by Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen, 2021, Verso.**

In "The Imperial Mode of Living: Everyday Life and the Ecological Crisis of Capitalism", Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen argue that our everyday life, or *normality*, is deeply intertwined with capitalism's inherent reliance on environmental destruction. This system, which the authors term *the imperial mode of living*, not only sustains itself by exploiting natural resources but also exacerbates global inequalities, poverty, and climate-related chaos. The book critically examines how this mode of living has become normalised, questioning why society has come to accept environmental degradation as a byproduct of progress, while its devastating consequences are often externalised and overlooked.

The authors argue that the sustainability of this imperial mode of living is rooted in its exclusivity, as it displaces the environmental and social costs onto marginalised communities and distant parts of the world. However, as more people are drawn into this system, the *outside* or marginalised space is shrinking. Exploring how normalised power relations maintain this destructive system and questioning the power dynamics that allow such a mode of living to persist situates the book within a Foucauldian framework where power is diffuse, pervasive, and embedded in everyday practices and institutions, shaping and constraining individual behaviours and societal norms. Their appropriation of Foucauldian concepts of power and subjectivity is evident when they argue that what they call the imperial mode of living is deeply embedded in individuals, shaping their subjectivity and common sense by normalising itself (p.42).

Having established the foundations of the imperial mode of living, the authors, in the following chapter, delve into situating the environmental crisis within multiple crises today and connecting environmental to social, economic, and political distresses. However, according to the authors, solutions to these crises, including sustainability concerns, adhere to developmental and modernisation pathways lacking radical transformative functions which reveal how the imperial mode of living urges unsustainable practices that are ingrained in our everyday lives and consolidated through the vested interests of the governing elite. Moreover, critiques of the imperial, capitalist mode of production often fail to repel the system, allowing its underlying structures to persist by only adhering to developmentalist solutions to sustainability issues.

The term *imperiality* underscores the dynamics of human relations with nature, signalling domination, power, and inequality produced and reproduced through the uneven appropriation of nature. The normalisation of exploitative, destructive everyday practices is consolidated through economic structures, political institutions, and cultural norms that make such practices natural. The authors further elaborate on the concept by delving into the dimensions of imperiality. Imperiality connotes, first and foremost, the historical continuity of colonialism, in which labour power and nature were commodified. In modern times, this commodification goes hand in hand with the externalisation of its consequences, where the fruits of this imperial mode of living do not extend to the lives of certain groups and specific regions. This, in turn, hierarchises societies, creating social division and inequality. Lastly, the most important dimension of the concept can be regarded as its hegemonic aspect. The authors apply an extension of Gramscian hegemony, emphasizing the consent of the governed through common sense, perfectly explained in the

* E-mail: Nilay.barlas@uni-bielefeld.de

following sentence: *"When domination does not use naked force, discipline, and oppression to maintain itself, but becomes part of the wishes and desires of the populace, then it becomes individual identity, shapes it, and is not felt as domination"* (p. 56–57).

In the next chapter, the authors proceed to historicise the imperial mode of living. Initially, they trace its roots to European colonisation and early capitalism, where the domination and degradation of nature began alongside the capitalist valorisation of resources. As wealth accumulated, it fuelled the rise of early liberal capitalism and the emergence of a dominant bourgeoisie, which enabled capital to evade political coercion and transcend borders, allowing it to flourish globally and externalise its impacts. This period also saw increasing competition for raw materials and colonies as the imperial mode of living permeated the lives of the elite, shaping their habits, lifestyles, and everyday preferences – such as the consumption of sugar, coffee, and tea.

However, waves of counter-movements, particularly labour movements, emerged as driving forces for a compromise between the interests of the powerful and the demands of the subaltern classes. At this point, the authors discuss the Fordist regime as the next stage in the development of the imperial mode of living, analysing it as the catalyst for the expansion of this mode of living into the lives of ordinary people, especially in the Global North. According to the authors, the Fordist regime is where this specific mode of living, once confined to elites, becomes universalised and extends into the lives of the broader population, driven by the Fordist compromise.

The authors exemplify this expansion with the rise of mass automobility, presenting it as a manifestation of the victory of the bourgeoisie ideology over everyday life (p. 147). This expansion also led to the relocation of polluting industries from the Global North to the Global South. In this context, I observe traces of Dependency Theory, particularly Andre Gunder Frank's emphasis on the metropolis-satellite model, which describes the extraction of wealth and resources from peripheral regions. However, I believe the authors diverge from a purely deterministic view, they do not propose a monolithic unity of colonial and neocolonial domination, nor do they diminish the relevance and influence of regions outside Europe (p. 72). Nonetheless, they do not offer a clear alternative to fully negate the perspective that non-European societies are passive and outside modernisation.

In my view, the most interesting part of the book was the discussion of green capitalism. Green capitalism, basically, is the reflection of capitalism's survival by adapting itself to the requirements of the time through "a mode of permanent change" (p.170). Traditionally, protecting nature was seen as conflicting with capitalistic practices and goals, but now protecting nature has become a part of capitalist expansion, or a tool, so to speak. This reflects a shift in how nature is valued and utilised within capitalism, often referred to as the *valorisation of nature*. This transformation, according to the authors, remains compatible with dominant discourses of capitalism, where market-driven ecological modernisation occurs through ascribing a price to nature and using this added value for capitalist expansion, such as payments for ecosystem services. I can elaborate on this discussion by giving an example from bioproducts. Organic egg products, for instance, assure customers that the eggs have been produced in ways that are better for the environment, animals, and human health, in contrast to regular industrial eggs, which involve the use of synthetic pesticides and non-organic feeds. Therefore, this bio-label itself adds value to the product, allowing it to be sold at higher prices than regular products. This, in turn, implies that the protection of nature is no longer solely based on moral choice; rather, it is an aspect of capitalism's expansion by enhancing the economic value of the *eco-friendly* product. The protection of nature (through sustainable farming practices) is no longer just a moral or ecological choice; it is a selling point that enhances the economic value of the product. This shift signifies that nature itself has become a marker for profitability within the capitalist system.

Overall, the book helped me connect different ideas that I was already familiar with or had been contemplating, allowing me to solidify my thoughts. Additionally, it provided me with a different perspective on reading world history. While interpreting history from a historical-materialism standpoint, placing nature as the subject and main figure was particularly interesting to me. The book's critique of the sustainability of current economic growth models is particularly relevant

for policymakers and scholars alike. Brand and Wissen challenge the dominant paradigm that equates economic success with continuous growth, as it is incompatible with ecological balance. Policymakers could draw from the book to advocate for alternative models that can prioritise ecological health and social well-being over mere GDP growth. On the other hand, the frequent reliance on different theories, quotes, and studies throughout the book can lead to confusion for the reader. The authors often discuss multiple academic works and introduce various terms within a single page, which can make it difficult for the reader to keep track and may cause a sense of being overwhelmed, wondering how to retain all the information presented. Nonetheless, readers who study sociology, anthropology, and political science must read this book to better understand the intersections of capitalism, ecological transformation, and the role of nature in shaping socio-economic structures.

Nilay Barlas is an MA Sociology student at Bielefeld University, with a focus on the politics of knowledge, postcolonial theory, and the historical sociology of education, nationalism, and global inequality. She is currently working for project titled “Many Moving Parts: Continuity, Disruption and Change in Global Humanitarian Aid Relations”. Her upcoming MA thesis explores the extent to which Turkey’s Village Institutes (1940–1950) evaded the power-knowledge nexus of disciplinary institutions. She approaches the Institutes as a potential rupture in the rural subject formation, analyzing graduates’ autobiographical writings to explore how they reflect a historically contingent shift in the state's engagement with the peasantry and its implications for subjectivity.