

Review – Imperial Subjects: Citizenship in an Age of Crisis and Empire

Written by Vanessa Andreotti

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VANESSA ANDREOTTI, JUN 4 2015

Imperial Subjects: Citizenship in an Age of Crisis and Empire

By: Colin Mooers

New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.

I start this review with the words offered in the very last paragraph of the text, which was the first thing that signalled that this book could address a gap in scholarship in this area:

“Capitalism and imperialism in our own time have intensified the alienation and reification of human needs, which they then seek to satisfy through purely market based means. If, as Adorno and Benjamin insist, the reversal of the fetishistic social forms, which dominate capitalism, must begin with an act of remembrance of what has been forgotten, then we still have some way to go. But as the tenacity of recent struggles has proven, many have not been fooled by either the dream worlds of capital or the humanitarian fantasies of Empire. And where memory resides, so also do the seeds of resistance” (p. 131).

In my field of research (of global/international/development education), where heavy investments in the dream worlds of capital and the fantasies of Empire are the norm, this book offers a refreshing revisited critique of capital and of liberal democracies in light of the contemporary crisis-producing neoliberalism. The titles of the five chapters already provide a taste of the author’s promise to articulate the intimate connections between liberal ideas of citizenship and political subjectivity, and the neoliberal form of empire.

In the first chapter ‘Birth of the liberal subject: Commodities, Money and Citizenship’, Mooers relates important critiques of primitive capital accumulation, commodity fetishism, and ideology, to liberal ideals of citizenship, freedom and multiculturalism. Mooers highlights, for example, that citizenship rights within capitalism work like a neurotic ‘compromise formation’: as workers struggle against capitalist exploitation, they are also drawn to the attractions of capitalism. The fetishized false promise of equality in a ‘community of money’ fuels a common sense where human needs are perceived to be mediated by the market, which undermines the foundations for resistance as people know about the exploitation that circumscribes the compromise and yet choose to participate as if this violence did not exist. Mooers finishes this chapter with a discussion on race, gender and citizenship where he concludes that through validation of visible forms of difference, liberal multiculturalism effaces the lived experiences of racism and sexism.

The second chapter, ‘The neoliberal counter revolution: From social rights to social debts’ focuses on the issue of property rights and the capitalist tendencies for overcapacity and over-accumulation. Mooers documents the evolution of capitalism towards the era of ‘insane’ financialization, where, he argues, ‘fictitious capital’ stands outside of lines of production and starts to, more aggressively, mobilize the state in its interests. Mooers traces the workings of neoliberalism from its original laboratory in Latin America to the current Greek austerity experiment. He argues that while past labours used to be a promise of future security in social citizenship, now the past is a hostage of an uncertain future where capitalism colonizes all spheres of life: “in place of faltering state provision, consumer credit and market-based pensions; private insurance as a substitute for universal health care; student loans in place of affordable tuition and real state loans in place of social housing; in short, social debts in place of social rights” (p. 61).

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The third chapter, ‘Securitizing’ Empire: Small wars and humanitarian fantasies’ examines the complicated nexus of relationships connecting the extra-territorial logic of capital and the territorial logic of the state, focusing on how the state has become a “naked servant of neoliberal capitalism even at the cost of shedding some of its former powers of legitimation” (p. 79). Mooers describes a new informal market imperialism that is about “the universalization of capitalism as a social and political system” (p. 81) and that is ironically often cloaked in the language of anti-imperialism, for example, in initiatives such as the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This new imperialism is propelled at the interface between the neo-liberal market state, the calculus of financial capital and a new war doctrine. It is also fuelled by the ideology of ‘Western saviour’ humanitarian intervention that forecloses the violence of its complicity in dispossession, destitution and genocide. Mooers echoes others in his conclusion that human rights cannot seriously challenge the new Empire because it is an integral part of its ideology.

In the fourth chapter, ‘States of security: From social security to the security state,’ Mooers discusses how ideas of national and social security have been linked to and subsidized by liberal imperialism. He describes how the extension of civic and social rights during the Cold War only happened when the interests of capital were first secured. For example, while the US state violently targeted civil rights movements in its anti-communist crusade (including assassinations), it also funded artists and intellectuals to promote the superiority of Western democracy. Mooers then explores how strategies of national security that used to be mobilized through the idea of the well-being of citizens started to be re-oriented towards a ‘politics of fear’ within the neoliberal context of ‘security fetish’.

The final chapter, ‘Contesting Empire: Beyond the citizenship illusion’ outlines movements and ideas that have been or can (potentially) be mobilized against capitalism and Empire. In this chapter, Mooers summarizes some of the limitations of traditional frameworks for political action at the interface between the dispossession of capital and the impossible promises of liberal democracies:

“While liberal democracy is unlikely to disappear any time soon, it is equally doubtful that the constraints and limits imposed by its basic form are adequate to the challenges which it now confronts. For those in the Global North, the freedoms afforded by liberal capitalism have increasingly become insufficient to address the accelerating wealth inequalities of post-crisis neoliberalism. Moreover, these populations have been asked to align themselves with an imperial order in which permanent war against unseen enemies has become a fact of life, with few of the material rewards of an earlier phase of empire. In the Global South, accumulation through dispossession in its market and military forms has only worsened pre-existing disparities both within these societies and between the centre and the margins of the global system” (p. 130).

Mooers’ ability to capture and synthesize insights that show political, ideological and existential contradictions in his important revisited critique of capital is the greatest contribution of this book, which I highly recommend to anyone interested in ideas of national or global citizenship. The limitations of this work lie in a form of critique still circumscribed by and invested in (to different degrees) teleological/dialectical reasoning, anthropocentric Cartesian subjectivities, innocent and heroic agency, and totalizing forms of knowledge production. These investments are rooted in a modern onto-epistemic grammar that is central (though not reducible) to the production of imperial subjects, liberal citizenship, and capital accumulation. Without addressing these investments, we may be bound to repeat them, and their harmful effects. In this sense, the critique follows an inevitable circular movement as proposed solutions tend to reproduce the problems they aim to address. Nevertheless engaging with this critique and its limits is important if we want to open up our imaginaries in order to make different mistakes in the future.

About the author:

Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti holds a Canada Research Chair in Race, Inequalities and Global Change at the Department of Educational Studies, University of British Columbia, in Canada. Her research focuses on analyses of historical and systemic patterns of reproduction of imaginaries and inequalities, and how these limit and/or enable possibilities for collective existence and global change.

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