Interview – Darren Byler

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Darren Byler is an Assistant Professor at the School for International Studies at the Simon Fraser University. His teaching and research examine the dispossession of stateless populations through forms of contemporary capitalism and colonialism in China, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. He specialises in anthropology, forced migration, gender, China studies, labour and political economy. Byler has previously written for The Diplomat, SupChina and China File. His previous book was titled *In the Camps: China's High-Tech Penal Colony* in which he studies China's surveillance system in Xinjiang. His recent publication called *Terror Capitalism: Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City* theorises China's colonisation of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang.

Where do you see the most exciting debates/research happening in your field?

One of the most exciting things I see happening in anthropology and China Studies is the way broader discussions of the unfinished project of decolonization and ongoing social inequality is catalysing new research and institutional restructuring. This has led not only to a focus on amplifying voices marginalized by histories of imperialism and colonialism, but also it has begun to reshape the norms of what counts as cutting edge scholarship. In anthropology it means that there is a greater focus on anti-racist collaboration and community-oriented scholarship, and less of the extractive and elitist scholarship that shaped the orientation of the discipline in the past. In China Studies—a field that is dominated by historians and literary scholars—there is the beginning of a decolonial focus that shifts away from the self-referential, methodological nationalist approach of "Sinology" that has isolated this field of study at the expense of comparative, public-facing scholarship. Now, following the lead of pioneering scholars such as Ching Kwan Lee and Shu-mei Shih, scholars are situating China within global economic and political systems, instead of echoing "Chinese exceptionalism" approaches to understanding what makes China singular as an area of study. The rise of Sinophone Studies has opened up discussions of comparative colonialisms, and a new focus on historical materialism and labour issues has invigorated a new focus on the geoeconomics of global China.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

A great deal of my thinking was shaped by discussions of contemporary capitalism and globalization in the 1990s and 2000s. The work of advisors of mine at the University of Washington, Sasha Su-ling Welland, Ann Anagnost and Stevan Harrell, pushed me to think about labour outsourcing, the decimation of the Chinese social welfare system, and shifting ethnic politics that occurred over that period. As I started to study labour and Uyghur and Han migrant culture in Northwest China, a question Ann raised—"Why exactly are these Uyghur and Han men leaving their villages and migrating to the city?"—really struck me as a fundamental question that demanded a careful analysis of the material issues associated with imposed development and the global economy. In the end, following the lead of Uyghur scholars such as Ilham Tohti, I came to the conclusion that Uyghurs were leaving their land because it was being taken over by corporate cotton farms (among other factors) and life in the city promised an escape from the poverty and powerlessness of a kind of tenant farming lifestyle. The global demand for cheap made-in-China clothes is also what pushed Han migrants to settle in the region working in a whole range of jobs that supported the extractive economy. There are plenty of cultural factors at play here too—desires for a good life, attachment to traditions, ideological training and so on were all elements of this story.

In your latest book *Terror Capitalism,* you investigate how resource extraction from Uyghur lands in China has led to "terror capitalism". What do you mean by this, and how does this contribute to our commonly held understanding of China's political-economy?

The central claim that the book makes is that the dispossession of Uyghur lands along with the capture of their social institutions by non-Muslim settlers in the 1990s and 2000s, created a structural antagonism that led to Uyghur protest and new forms of state and corporate control of the Uyghurs. The desire to secure the expropriation, or theft, of Uyghur lands, led state actors to private and public tech firms to build a digital enclosure system that has been mapped onto the entire region. Terror capitalism— what I name this process of digital enclosure—is a frontier of global capitalism that centers on first the production of a population of potential terrorists by these state actors and state contractors and then the exploitation of the "terrorist-workers" that they produced. Through a counter-terrorism campaign that has been pointed at Uyghurs and other Muslims in the region, the state uses private technology companies to harvest Uyghur data and sort the population using this data. They then turn the "reeducated" portion of this population who were deemed guilty of minor "terrorism" activities such as attending mosques or downloading Whatsapp into workers in securitized "smart" factories and using the threat of detention to send others to less securitized but still heavily surveilled factories. This system of forced proletarianization has the effect of further completing the process of removing Uyghurs from their land and, by placing them in non-Muslim, heavily surveilled factories, halting the reproduction of their language and traditions. It also helps Chinese manufacturers to find a devalued, domestic source of labour which helps to sustain economic growth in China's manufacturing-centred economy. Ultimately, the way terror capitalism is expressed in the Chinese context is conditioned by China's position in the global economy. Similar complexes in places like Israel, India and the United States have different effects when it comes to the labour of Muslims and other targeted groups, but the data harvesting and market expansion associated with computer vision AI, is what makes counter-terrorism a global growth industry.

In the book you argue that Uyghur men "develop masculinities and homosocial friendships to protect themselves against gendered, ethnoracial, and economic violence". What is the aim of such gendered state violence against men? How does this reconfigure gender relations among Uyghurs?

As in all contemporary wars on terror, Muslim men of military age are the primary target of state surveillance and incarceration. They are deemed the primary actors and threat in the insurgency the state and it's contractors have conjured to justify the mass internment campaign. As in most societies adult men are the primary income earners in Uyghur households, by removing significant proportion of the Uyghur men from their homes and villages—perhaps between 10 and 20 percent of this population—the system has rendered Uyghurs further dependent on the state. In state media representations of this gendered violence, the state represents this process as a form of feminist liberation for Uyghur women—a fundamentally false and imperialist discourse that repeats elements of the Bush-era justification for the invasion of Afghanistan. A state mandate programme of saving Muslim women from their husbands, fathers and sons through incarceration and assigned labour, has the effect of radically reducing the physical and cultural reproduction of Uyghur society.

In the book I also show how state violence and emasculation was linked to domestic violence toward Uyghur women. This is not to excuse forms of patriarchy and misogyny that exist in Uyghurs society, as they do in all societies, but to situate this violence in the broader social structures that exacerbate it. Uyghur women, like Uyghur men and Uyghur children, have been deeply damaged by the effects of terror capitalism.

What are the signs of settler colonialism in Xinjiang? How does this interact with capitalism? In what way is this similar to or different from settler colonialism in North America and Palestine?

The recent economic and political history of Xinjiang is shaped by the state-led and Han settler implemented dispossession of Uyghur lands and labour, and the capture of their social institutions. These three elements, occupation, dispossession, and the domination of native social institutions, are the defining elements of settler colonialism. Throughout the history of capitalism, colonial and imperial processes have functioned as the frontier of capitalist expansion. In fact, in many cases company investments have proceeded before the arrival of militarized occupations established to protect these investments.

There are several important differences between the Chinese colonial project and settler colonial projects in North America and Palestine. Unlike these other projects, the Chinese colonization of its Inner Asian frontier comes after its own semi-colonization by European powers and Japan. As in India's colonization of Kashmir, Chinese colonization emerges out of what Nitasha Kaul refers to as a "moral wound" of the former colonized. This discourse of the moral wound is manifested in an impulse to claim the perceived "greatness" of the colonizer. So in the case of Xinjiang, state media repeatedly compares their project as similar to, but better than, the American colonization of native peoples. As with Christian colonizers, this is represented through discourses of civilizational salvation and reeducation, even as, in both cases, negative eugenics and interment campaigns are put in motion. In distinction from European colonial mythos, and in line with the Israeli colonization of Palestine, Chinese authorities and settlers claim a type of birth-right inheritance of the Uyghur homeland by eliminating Uyghur histories and replacing them with political histories of partial military occupations by prior Chinese, Mongol and Manchu empires that date back over the past two millennia. So rather than a "doctrine of discovery" that typifies settler colonies such as Australia and North America, Chinese authorities claim counter-factually to be among the indigenous inhabitants of Uyghur lands and they represent Uyghurs as a "backward" people among the family of Asiatic ethnic groups that they identify as Chinese.

Finally, as in the Russian colonization of Central Asia, Xinjiang is an internal colony separated from the colonizer not by an expanse of water but by vast deserts and mountains, linguistic, religious and cultural difference, which mean that processes of demarcating territorial sovereignty is a more intricate procedure than in some of the more imprecise Euro-centric framings of colonization. Understanding the singularity of these processes in an ongoing concern of mine and a number of other scholars such as Grace H. Zhou, Dawa Lokyitsang, and Guldana Salimjan.

How does the Chinese state justify the creation of "reeducation" camps in Xinjiang? What role do China's surveillance systems and digital technologies play in this?

Chinese authorities talk about the "closed concentrated education and training centres" as doing two things. First, they are a counter-terrorism measure intended to take care of the so-called "Xinjiang problem" once and for all. Second, they are a mechanism of so-called "poverty alleviation" that places former detainees in securitized factories, while producing population-level status coercion for the undetained population. Failure to comply with job assignments and education, family planning, and religion regulations can result in the negative credential or "untrustworthy" label which in turn leads to internment.

The dataveillance and biometric surveillance system was essential to both "diagnose" untrustworthy Muslims who were guilty of minor "terrorism" activities such as studying the Quran without permission and guidance. They are also important in managing the movement and behavior of the remaining population. As for Palestinians, and to an increasing extent Kashmiris, these systems are what produce the "open-air prison" aspect of full-spectrum control. The Xinjiang system may be even more comprehensive because the Chinese state has full access and near total control of private internet systems in China, unlike the nested extraterritorial systems of control that are produced by global technology companies such as Google and Meta in places like Kashmir and Palestine.

You are currently working on a project to analyse the movement of modern-day capitalism and colonialism from China to Malaysia through digital infrastructural systems. What have your preliminary findings been? How is this different from 20th century imperial world-making?

My current project is examining the effects of Chinese-made information technology systems in the global South. This project follows a number of the technologies and companies I investigated in the Xinjiang context, to consider how Chinese state actors and private companies build global China as a field of power. What my preliminary findings (and more accurately the work of scholars like Ching Kwan Lee, Miriam Driessen, Maria Repnikova, Ivan Franceschini) show, is that there are significant differences in the current moment of world-making relative to the past century.

Much of the difference has to do with that history of imperialism that you note. Because many of the countries that receive Chinese infrastructure projects are former colonies themselves they are quite cognizant of the potential of recolonization. And so in many contexts we see receiving communities using Chinese investment in ways that best

serve their interests. At the same time, it is also clear that Chinese surveillance systems in particular can be adapted for antidemocratic purposes and that dependence on China has the effect of extending its sphere of influence in the world.

In my current work I'm interested in understanding how communities use a mix of different types of technology and institutional power against each to achieve limited forms of protection and autonomy. In general though, stateless or disfavoured populations are the most vulnerable to the harms caused by surveillance systems regardless of who builds them. In some contexts, such as the United States and Malaysia, some of these harms are unintended, but nevertheless result in the devaluation of the labour of undocumented groups such as asylum seekers and refugees—pushing them into the grey economy in service to the protected population. I'm interested in thinking comparatively about these systems to understand more precisely how liberal and illiberal systems coexist and interact with the global economy.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

My advice is to stay grounded in the communities that are most effected by the problems you are examining in your research. Listen carefully to what differently positioned people tell you. This allows you to keep the political stakes of your project at the centre of your work. I have found that theorization based on these power dynamics, rather than from the changing currents of scholarship in your field, can help one produce a scholarly intervention that will matter for people who are most effected by the thing you are studying. Thinking collaboratively, and understanding that effected communities carry knowledge that must be taken seriously, will, in many cases, help you to find a project that contributes to the process of decolonization and antiracism. This process is not only about examining colonization directly, it's also about redistributing privilege and power, and the respect of difference. The last thing I would say is that there are plenty of smart people in the world, but people who are curious about the lives and interests of others is a more difficult thing to find. Be one of those smart people who cares.