



Heide Gerstenberger

Markt und Gewalt: Die Funktionsweise des historischen Kapitalismus

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Reviewed by **Christian Lotz**

About the reviewer

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From an unorthodox perspective, in her new book, Heide Gerstenberger, who is one of the most fascinating historians working in the Marxist tradition today (broadly construed), presents substantial and wide-ranging contributions to the attempt to understand our contemporary world and its economy. Although the

author does not mention this explicitly, on the metalevel the book can be read as a comment on certain positions held in Marxist theory and philosophy regarding the relation between “method” and “history.” Though Marx would never have approved of the separation of theory and history, in recent developments we have seen a debatable separation of the “logic” of capital from its historical development(s), particularly within Structuralism as well as in the context of the German “New Marx Reading”. Gerstenberger’s book can be read as a study that demonstrates that theory remains empty as long as it cannot be supported by (and reverted into) empirical and historical research.

The book is one of the most comprehensive overviews of the past and contemporary violent relations contained in the economic system insofar as the author covers the history of capitalism from the 18th Century through the 21st Century. The book falls into two parts, one roughly describing the period before financially-driven global capitalism, including colonialism and the German situation between 1933 and 1945, and one describing central aspects of the now existing global system of capital.

As a reviewer who is not trained in history and whose historical knowledge of economic developments before the second World War is very limited, I feel unable to offer judgments about whether the reconstruction of early capitalism and the appropriation of the historical material is valid, but I doubt that the author of the much acclaimed *Impersonal Power: History and Theory of the Bourgeois State* (Haymarket Books, 2009) makes many factual mistakes.

The main thesis of the book is twofold, namely, (1) that labor performed under capitalism cannot be reduced to contractual and formally free (wage) labor, and (2) that relations of direct violence and power have not been overcome by the inner rationality and “civilizing” forces of capital. This thesis is demonstrated by a truly comprehensive overview of how

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force, inasmuch as it analyzes this world through a wide range of forms of economic violence; and it becomes very clear that the analysis is directed against scholars who argue not only that capitalism requires free wage labor, but also that capitalism has a tendency to overcome direct power relations by replacing them with “abstract” economic relations. According to Gerstenberger’s meticulous reconstructions, we should conclude that the wage labor concept is far too narrow for grasping the relation between capital and labor. Reading her book opens the reader’s eye to the extent to which direct violence, direct control, and direct forms of exploitation are not only “still with us,” but, more importantly, that they *make up an essential part of our global system*, even if this has been pushed to the margins of attention.

A recurring motif in Gerstenberger’s *tome* is that *Schuld knechtschaft* (bonded labor) and slavery (taking into account that there is a discussion about what is and what counts as “slavery,” which Gerstenberger mentions in several places) is not a thing of the colonial past, but in many historical facets is still one of the main instruments of making laborers conform to the most terrible living and labor conditions. The conditions in the global shipping, textile, sex, agricultural and fishing industries are especially worrisome and, in most cases, unabashedly accepted by Western states.

Even for someone who did not need to be convinced of the truth of Marx’s famous sentence that “capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt,” the book at times reads like a horror story of the physical and mental oppression of laboring bodies. How Gerstenberger can keep her neutral, rational and distanced voice throughout the entire text is both admirable and troublesome. Her neutral tone is achieved through a research-based, and at times positivist, approach to her material, which is achieved through her avoidance of narrative and normative elements within her analysis. Nevertheless, that Gerstenberger’s underlying position is undoubtedly not only political and normative, but also an ongoing comment on the contemporary situation, is visible in how often she cites sources from newspapers, alternative political outlets, and organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Citing these sources is important not only for understanding how urgent these issues are, it also points to the invisibility of many aspects of market violence in the existing academic literature.

The cases that she discusses in the later chapters, such as sex work, human trafficking, the house maid market, day workers, non-union protected and precarious labor, labor camps in

Qatar, legal offshore spaces, deregulation of ships and global shipments (flags of convenience), labor conditions on cargo ships, the exploitation of labor(ers) in export processing zones that are located in legal no man's land, the role of so called "qualified industrial zones," the oppressive labor conditions and sexual discrimination of women, are

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literature the attempts by capital (with the support and force of governments) to make sure that labor solidarity is destroyed has been underestimated. In this connection, Gerstenberger examines many cases ranging from North- and South-America through Asia, where unions and labor organizations have been violently attacked, representatives murdered or threatened, and collective resistance diminished. It is amazing to see how often she cites material from international labor watch dogs and fractionized unions that do not receive any public attention. Moreover, she describes and analyzes the health risks included in many forms of globally industrialized labor. For example, she refers to the existence and role of poison in products and labor conditions, as well as the extent to which we see an exploding global market for organs based on the exploitation of the poorest and weakest. This market includes not only internal organs, but also, for example, a market for hair that will be used in Western products, including hair extensions, and which, in the majority of cases, has been violently stolen from women in poorer countries. In addition, she describes the roles of land and water grabbing, mineral extraction for new electronics and phones, oil production in Africa, as well as informal economies such as drug trafficking, which, according to Gerstenberger, shows like no other area the closeness of politics and economy (647), and pirating (being rooted in extractive oil and fish industries) in the continuation and, indeed, worsening of the exploitation of impoverished communities around the globe. According to Gerstenberger, almost all of these situations point to the integration of criminal and violent appropriation of resources (natural, labor, etc.) into legal forms of economic and state relations.

Gerstenberger's analyses are important since all too often we refer only abstractly to these aspects of global economies as "negative market externalities" while remaining silent about the *direct* violence on which these externalities are based. Talking about "costs" already hides the real relations that are contained in these "externalities." Gerstenberger refers to many examples, including well known cases (Apple, Monsanto, e-waste, shipbreaking, land grabbing) as well as lesser known examples, such as the South-American, Asian, and African production of roses that women workers are producing while being subjected to pesticides and other harmful chemicals. States in Europe and the US control whether the roses are threats to consumers, but leave aside the abhorrent risks that (women) laborers are subjected to in rose production (541).

Overall, her book combines the highest virtues of uniting scientific research with urgent social and political matters. Despite its length, the book is enlightening and an eye-opener because the author takes the reader through hundreds of examples and concrete developments. At times the reader feels exhausted and overwhelmed by being made to

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global capitalism alone contains almost 1000 footnotes).

With this procedure she follows in the footsteps of Marx, who employs a similar strategy in the historical sections of *Capital* by abstaining from direct normative evaluations.

Nevertheless, Gerstenberger's book is an outcry, which becomes astutely visible in sentences such as "every single boy, who in an Indian quarry makes cobble stones from rocks, is one too much" (523) or in statements about the delusional explanations of current border politics in the name of waging wars against the traffickers (664), which hide the truth that current border politics lead to violence towards migrating individuals.

At times it remains unclear what the overall theoretical goal of Gerstenberger's empirical descriptions is, especially in cases that have been well documented and discussed before in postcolonial and globalization studies. It would have been helpful for the reader to understand how her results and position differ from or contribute to other approaches in contemporary debates about global capitalism. Especially since she possesses a superb theoretical knowledge about Marxism and political economy, one wishes that Gerstenberger would have discussed the underlying theories in more detail.

The exact relations between "radically mobilized capital" (488), investment, debt, macro-economic developments and the violences "on the ground" is not always clear, although it becomes crystal clear throughout the book that the violence in the system is to a large extent held together and enforced by state power and needs political resistance if conditions are to improve. Although Gerstenberger offers several smaller sections entitled "theoretical remarks" that are immensely helpful, one would have wished for more intense reflections, especially given that she expresses skepticism towards theoretical "constructions;" i.e., theories without the analysis of concrete relations (534). Gerstenberger's overview of the "support of capitalist interests via state violence" (503) does not appear to be sufficiently bound to a theoretically-based analysis and, hence, (at least some of) the political consequences she draws remain suspect. For example, it remains unclear how "capital" or, as the author seems to prefer, "capital ownership", really *functions* – even via state violence. More specifically, one wonders how *exactly* investment steers the dynamics that Gerstenberger analyzes, such as trafficking or the markets for house maids. In addition, the term "capital ownership" that the author seems to prefer is problematic because most investments nowadays are no longer in the hands of individuals. Accordingly, at some point it is necessary to offer a theoretical analysis of how the society as a whole is constituted, and

her short remark in the conclusion of the book that the unequal distribution of property is at the heart of the evil that we are facing worldwide remains insufficient. However, to be fair, perhaps this would have required writing another book of the same length!

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and nevertheless brutal number of 168 million enslaved child workers, often doubly exploited through sexual exploitation, speaks for itself (525).

Overall, the book might not come as a surprise to any specialist in globalization studies, but without doubt it is a true “missile” that is directed at contemporary theorists and defenders of global capitalism as a decent system that overcomes violence, inhuman labor conditions, and exploitations of the past, especially because of its massive amount of evidence and case descriptions pointing to the contrary. One thing is clear: whereas some argue that the conflict between labor and capital is a thing of the past, this book makes clear that these positions are based on a blurred, romanticized, and misinformed vision of our times. Given this, Gerstenberger remains – despite her critical remarks about the neglect of state violence and the usage of theoretical constructs such as the “global proletariat” (533) in the existing literature – an heir to recent Marxist traditions that have pointed to the problematic aspects of Marxist class analysis, but nevertheless do not give up recognizing the importance of labor exploitation and power relations via the disciplining of labor. Fashionable terms, such as “cognitive capitalism” or “affective labor” are, for good reasons, absent from Gerstenberger’s study.

To some extent, Gerstenberger’s book delivers contemporary and historical evidence that Marx’s description of violence contained in “primitive accumulation” is not a thing of the past, but, instead, is an essential element of our contemporary finance-driven capitalism. Even for someone who has done research and taught about globalized capitalism (such as the reviewer), the book becomes more depressing the more one reads it. This “mood” could not be better expressed than it is in the poem *A Screw Fell to the Ground* by the 24 year old Apple/Foxconn worker Xu Lizhi, who committed suicide in 2014, and which Gerstenberger quotes (499, in German translation):

A screw fell to the ground
In this dark night of overtime
Plunging vertically, lightly clinking
It won’t attract anyone’s attention
Just like last time
On a night like this
When someone plunged to the ground

(Xu Lizhi, English translation taken from [here](#))

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