

# The Imperial Mode of Living: Everyday Life and the Ecological Crisis of Capitalism

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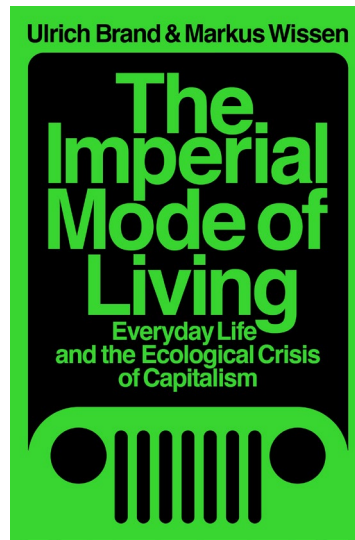
## AUTHOR QUERIES

- Q1** Marx and Engels 1848: Please provide name and location of publisher for this entry
- Q2** Richardson et al. 2017: Please provide names of all editors for this volume

# The Imperial Mode of Living: Everyday Life and the Ecological Crisis of Capitalism

Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen, trans. Zachary King. London, UK: Verso, 2021. xxv and 230 pp., notes, bibliography, index. \$48.00 paper (ISBN 9781788739122).

Reviewed by Noel Castree, Department of Geography, Manchester University, Manchester, UK.



This book is the fruit of a long-standing research and writing partnership. First published nearly five years ago, Ulrich Brand and Markus Wissen’s text is one of two to offer a plenary analysis of our current societal and environmental condition (the other book is called *The Limits to Capitalist Nature* [Wissen and Brand 2018]). *The Imperial Mode of Living* has recently been translated from German courtesy of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. For those unfamiliar with Brand and Wissen’s previous writings, this provides a clue: Issued by Verso, their book offers a holistic Marxist interpretation of our crisis-afflicted world. Although the duo rarely publish in the discipline of geography (an exception is an entry about socioecological transformation I commissioned for the *American Association of Geographers—sponsored International Encyclopedia of Geography* [Richardson et al. 2017]), their work is known to many critical geographers who study society–environment relations. This is because they analyze issues of interest to people such as myself, Geoff Mann, Jason Moore, Alex Loftus, Michael Ekers, Matthew Huber, Karen Bakker, Scott Prudham, Dick Walker, David Harvey, and many others. Although Brand and Wissen are located in political science, their concerns range far beyond international relations and the state system. The question is this: Does *The Imperial Mode of Living* advance understanding relative to existing theoretical and empirical insights?

Although the book is highly stimulating, it will probably not add much value to current geographical work about the political economy of environmental and social change. Written in an essayistic and assertive style, *The Imperial Mode of Living* makes a set of highly general claims about the causes and consequences of our world historical condition, and the prospects for a less violent mode of living. For those familiar with Marxian research into economy, society, and environment, these insights are pretty familiar (indeed almost axiomatic). For those new to research of this kind, the book is hard to engage with because—although written (and translated) very clearly—the style does not encourage debate (either with the authors

or the often nonconsensual literature inspiring their analysis). It simply “tells it like it is.”

The major message of the book is that capitalism is as contradictory as ever, but has now insinuated itself so deeply into everyday life that it is virtually impossible to dislodge—despite the increasingly manifest violence it inflicts on planet and people. In this sense, the early twenty-first-century capitalist system is imperial (or totalizing) in ways not seen previously in history, although accurately predicted by Marx and Engels (1848) in *The Communist Manifesto*. Whereas the founders of Marxism hoped that (an eventually) global capitalism would be overthrown by the proletariat it immiserates (“Workers of the world unite!”), Brand and Wissen currently see few prospects for revolutionary change. On the contrary, *capitalism* is the only true revolutionary in the modern world, even as its “iron laws” remain stubbornly enduring. In this context, a revolution against capital is akin to applying an emergency brake as much as it is about enacting a new mode of living. As the authors note, the great paradox of our time is that despite the widely recognized and severe crises it is causing, capitalism lacks any meaningful opposition—even

105	at the national scale in most parts of the world, never mind	As long essays go, this book is spirited and readable.	158
106	the global scale necessary to stop it in its wildly destructive	Apparently, it sparked lively debate in Germany (discussed	159
107	tracks. One indication is that there is presently no organiza-	in the foreword and introductory chapter). To my mind,	160
108	zing concept, such as socialism (let alone communism),	however, Malm's (2017) <i>the Progress of This Storm</i> is a more	161
109	that can unite oppositional forces in a common political	stimulating read, as is the brilliant <i>Climate Leviathan</i> by geog-	162
110	cause. As George Orwell and others rightly noted, power	raphers Mann and Wainwright (2017). As a plenary analysis	163
111	is especially effective when it robs opponents of a suitable	of our world, <i>The Imperial Mode of Living</i> lacks the evidence	164
112	language to articulate the substance of their criticisms and	base and analytical specificity one might reasonably hope	165
113	aspirations.	for in a "grand narrative." In that respect, recent books and	166
114		articles by Picketty, Harvey, and the late Panitch (among	167
115	We thus live in a time of profound tragedy. Capitalism's	others) offer richer insights into the contradictory dynamics	168
116	contradictions proliferate and scar our lives; yet the way	of contemporary capitalism. In short, <i>The Imperial Mode of</i>	169
117	they manifest seems to disbar organized transnational	<i>Living</i> will reaffirm the faith most Marxists have that capi-	170
118	opposition. As Brand and Wissen show, two key reasons	talism should be out of the question, no doubt persuading	171
119	are subjectification and externalization. The former entails	other readers that things are a lot worse than they had so	172
120	citizens in the North and developing economies (e.g.,	far imagined. The breezy, general character of the argument,	173
121	China) being materially and ideologically habituated to a	however, offers little to those who wish to understand the	174
122	capitalist way of life (e.g., a private home, a car, overseas	specific barriers to, and opportunities for, progressive change	175
123	holidays, etc.). The latter involves the wealthy parts of the	in the world now starting to resemble some novelist's vision	176
124	world transferring many of the costs of this way of life	of a dystopian future. Brand and Wissen's many related peer	177
125	elsewhere in both human and ecological terms. There are	review articles published before and since this book (in jour-	178
126	lots of other reasons, too, such as laws that have entrenched	nals such as <i>Review of International Political Economy</i> ) provide	179
127	neoliberal axioms, the defeat of strong trade unions, work-	a more granular sense of how and why humanity seems	180
128	place geographies that make worker organizing very hard,	locked in a capitalist prison house whose social and ecolog-	181
129	and so on. The majority of <i>The Imperial Mode of Living</i> is	ical foundations are being daily undermined. Readers are	182
130	devoted to exploring how capitalism has "gone global"	advised to look there, in the first instance, rather than in	183
131	since the crisis of the Fordist regime of accumulation	the pages of <i>The Imperial Mode of Living</i> .	184
132	occurred around fifty years ago, somehow becoming more		185
133	(not less) resilient to the blow-back from the proliferating		186
134	crises it precipitates. The final chapter (of eight) and an		187
135	afterword look for signs of anticapitalist opposition able to		188
136	take us beyond "green capitalism," "ecological moderniza-		189
137	tion," the Green New Deal, and other reformist measures.		190
138	The authors acknowledge there is a lot of discontent out		191
139	there (both religious and secular) but note that progressive		192
140	grassroots internationalism is in short supply compared to		193
141	the years of "the battle in Seattle." Populism of the right		194
142	is one of the morbid symptoms of the disease capitalism		195
143	causes within the body social.		196
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