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Seductions of Imperialism: Incapacitating Life, Fetishizing Death and Catastrophizing Ecologies

Anna M. Agathangelou
York University, Toronto

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Seductions of Imperialism: Incapacitating Life, Fetishizing Death and Catastrophizing Ecologies

Abstract

"China's Olympic Delusion" is a great piece which gestures to the ironies and/or contradictions of political systems in bed with imperialist-capitalism as we know it at this time: the tensions between a dominant idea that liberal democracy is the best political system to pay attention to and address human rights, and capitalism with no limits, can go hand-in-hand. This is merely the delusion, and also the fantasy, that keeps "us" (i.e., citizens, intellectuals etc) put, and from thinking critically.

Keywords

Human rights, China, Olympics, Imperialism, Capitalism

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by Anna M. Agathangelou

“China’s Olympic Delusion” is a great piece which gestures to the ironies and/or contradictions of political systems in bed with imperialist-capitalism as we know it at this time: the tensions between a dominant idea that liberal democracy is the best political system to pay attention to and address human rights, and capitalism with no limits, can go hand-in-hand. This is merely the delusion, and also the fantasy, that keeps “us” (i.e., citizens, intellectuals etc) put, and from thinking critically. This is not merely an irony, but I think this idea and its contingent practices have been for the longest time what has mediated and acted as a major subsidy to imperial-capitalism’s reign. Much of human rights talk now focuses its attention on China with regards to Tibet. This is, I do not doubt, a very important strategy, especially now with the attention (i.e., financial investments, economies of profit) that China is taking with the Olympics. As a strategy, it is useful transnationally as it makes these violations known to many in the world, particularly toward mobilizing resources and voices against the bourgeois regime of China when much is being invested there to allow for the “smooth” performances of the Olympics. Yet, China is not only violating Tibetan rights. Authors like [Balbir K. Punj](#) have brought to our attention the fact that China is also meddling in other areas (i.e., the appropriating of a section of Kashmir up to 5,800 square km) “in the Shaksgam valley along the Karakoram range with the connivance of Pakistan.” It is also crucial to juxtapose the human rights violations with the demands made for the longest time by U.S.-European-Japanese leaders and managers of capital for China to integrate itself into the capitalist production system. Indeed, it has done so. Yet, this integration can only be sustained by another major violation: incapacitating and catastrophizing our multiple ecologies, including our own bodies. Indeed, if China moves to capitalist production at the rate done in North America and Europe, we would soon be faced with a global environmental crisis. Yet, these human rights violations are not juxtaposed next to each other and next to this major environmental violation. However, human rights violations, including our move to catastrophizing our multiple ecologies are not merely China’s problem. Human rights violations are the norm and have been so in Somalia, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, East Timor, Aceh, Tibet, Iraq, North Korea. They are the norm regarding the Kurds, Palestinians, Tutsis, and Uygurs. They are the norm when one-quarter of the world’s population lives below the international poverty line of \$145 per year per capita, one billion lack safe water to drink, 880 million lack access to basic health, and millions of us are engaging daily in the destruction of the environment. These are not merely China’s problems. These are global problems that require innovative strategies against structural/ecological/bodily violations that the erection of imperial-capitalism depends on. The United States, for instance, left many poor, black, and queer bodies in New Orleans who now find themselves in the stream of death. Millions of U.S. children live in poverty, some thirty percent of all Americans have no medical insurance, and five to ten million are homeless. One-quarter of all African American males under the age of twenty-five are in jail, on probation, or on parole. And a U.N. Special Rapporteur describes capital punishment in the United States as arbitrary and racially discriminatory. The highest incarceration rate is found in the most liberal democratic country in the world. This is an irony!

As different states, including China, attempt to muffle the voices and the stench of dead bodies piling up around us, testaments to imperial-capitalist efficacy (See [Agathangelou, Bassichis, and](#)

[Spira 2008](#)), it is crucial for us to re-think strategies and interventions to disrupt these dominant discourses that hide/make invisible, and indeed make possible, human/environmental rights violations in the world. The violated, the dead and the dying, the ecologies speak, perhaps in grammars and methods that those who claim liberal democracy and/or economic viability cannot or do not desire to apprehend. History seems to refuse to rest as it persists to “not let us forget” the daily catastrophes we are faced in the world. And we are left to listen and re-direct our energies to disrupt the many violations, but also to articulate socialist projects beyond unlimited profits and ontological structural adjustments and violences. We are left to become intimate with all the human/ecological rights violations, including those we sanction, so that we might resist the seductive calls to a future unmoored by our history. The many different violations and deaths, including the destruction of our ecologies in our communities cannot any longer be marginalized. We must reckon with them (i.e., the killings of people in Iraq all in the name of freedom; the killings of Rwandans all in the name of ethnicity; the killing of Palestinians all in the name of security, etc.) if we are to wrestle ourselves from the thick fantasies and mystifications of a democracy that collapses violence with liberty, and human/ecological rights with imperial capitalism. Demystifying such moves and problematizing such human/ecological rights violations and their contingent structures is the way to counter the forces of structurally adjusting themselves by drawing “value,” and indeed by attempting to ontologically kill people’s lives, bodies, and ecologies to generate more capital and power. It is only then that the “impossible dreams” of unlimited expansion can be exposed and disrupted.

Anna M. Agathangelou is Associate Professor of political science at York University, Toronto and the director of Global Change Institute, Nicosia, Cyprus. Author of The Global Political Economy of Sex: Desire, Violence, and Insecurity in Mediterranean Nation-States (Palgrave 2004), Agathangelou is currently working on a book-project Terror-Necrotic Ontologies of Capital and Empire: Greek Theory and Possibilities for Substantive Democracy.