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Challenging the imperial mode of living by challenging ELSEWHERE: Spatial narratives and justice

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Abstract

This article frames imperial lifestyles as a problem of global justice and discusses the spatial logic that engenders the actual discrepancy between this moral standard of equal rights and reality. It claims that the notion of ELSEWHERE, as Brand and Wissen (2022) put it, plays a central role in understanding the conditions that allow this grossly unjust global separation between responsibility and effect to be stable. In doing this, it establishes the concept of communities of justice that determine the boundaries of moral responsibility and analyses the global spatial logic that underlies the course of these boundaries, as they are experienced in everyday life. The Westphalian system of sovereign nation states is its main component but certainly not the only one. Finally, it sheds light on current attempts to challenge this spatial logic as well as their potentials and limitations.

Zusammenfassung

In diesem Artikel werden imperiale Lebensstile als ein Problem globaler Gerechtigkeit dargestellt und die räumliche Logik erörtert, die die Diskrepanz zwischen dem moralischen Standard der Gerechtigkeit und der Realität hervorbringt. Der Begriff ANDERSWO, wie Brand und Wissen (2022) es formulieren, ist zentral für das Verständnis der Bedingungen, die es ermöglichen, dass diese ungerechte globale Trennung zwischen Verantwortung und Wirkung stabil sein kann. Dabei wird das Konzept der Gerechtigkeitsgemeinschaften (*Communities of Justice*) etabliert, die die Grenzen der moralischen Verantwortung bestimmen, und es wird die globale Raumlogik analysiert, die dem Verlauf dieser Grenzen zugrunde liegt, wie sie im Alltag erlebt werden. Das Westfälische System souveräner Nationalstaaten ist selbstverständlich ein Hauptbestandteil dieser Raumlogik, aber sicher nicht der einzige. Schließlich werden die aktuellen Versuche, diese räumliche Logik in Frage zu stellen, sowie deren Möglichkeiten und Grenzen beleuchtet.

Keywords imperial lifestyles, global justice, communities of justice, spatial logic

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“When you go to the toilet, shit disappears. You flush it. Of course, rationally you know it’s there in the canalization and so on, but at a certain level of your most elementary experience, it disappears from your world.”

Zizek in the film “The Examined Life” (Taylor 2008, min. 52)

1. Introduction

Zizek’s (Taylor 2008) statement points to a central distinction in the mode of everyday experience: the fundamental difference between abstract knowledge and its actual relevance in daily practices. This is why adding abstract knowledge and education alone will not lead to any significant change in everyday practices. In order to be relevant, circumstances rather have to be immediately tangible. Just like the toilet flush, ideology can make things, relations, or responsibilities disappear from view. He conceptualizes ideology in a psychoanalytical way as a state of mind that is divided between explicit, rationally constructed knowledge and a non-visible, unconscious mindset that is closely connected to internalized habits and forms of enjoyment (Zizek 2012). On a more abstract level, ideology not only informs and shapes narratives of good life and consumption patterns, but can also isolate from the perception of contradictions and impulses for justice. Therefore, understanding the workings of ideological thinking can open our eyes to the question of how injustice is possible and why unjust constellations, just like imperial modes of living, can be so stable.

Brand and Wissen (2022) claim a close connection between daily practices, ideology, and global systems of exploitation. Their foremost achievement lies in offering a concept that can render the connection between the micro-level of everyday life (e.g. mobility, food, clothing, notions of good living) and the macro-level of global inequalities immediately tangible. However, like Zizek (2012), they reject the appeal to the moral awareness of the individual consumer, since it is almost ineffective in their regard. Incidentally, they also dismiss the paradigm of ecological modernization, since they reject uncritical demands for sustainability or generalized concerns about the ecological basis for the survival of humanity. Instead, they stress the importance of injustice and power and call for fundamental structural changes in the realm of political economy.

Brand and Wissen (2022: 76) are talking about “broadly shared understandings of ‘good living’”, i.e. belief-systems that are an important part of the western narratives of development, growth and fulfillment. Zizek’s notion of ideology that is based on “habit and senseless enjoyment” (Vighi and Feldner 2007: 146) might be able to illuminate this habitual dimensions of their concept. This cultural dimension of the imperial mode of living is deeply embedded in everyday lives and therefore difficult to change. Zizek (2012) underlines that in liberal western societies dominant narratives of a fulfilled life are based on an imperative to enjoy, on consumerism and the logic of the market. This refers to a shared understanding that e.g. owning a house, a car and certain consumer goods means fulfillment and security.

We agree with Brand and Wissen (2022) that these socio-cultural mechanisms of ideology clearly have spatial dimensions. However, while they focus on the spatial flows of people, products and finances that constantly nourish imperial modes of living, in this article we would rather like to deal with the spatial narratives – i.e. the way that we endow spatial patterns with meaning – that underlie the basic logic of these structures of inequality. As Brand and Wissen claim, through the process of externalization the social and ecological effects of certain practices become visible and tangible ELSEWHERE. Those who are responsible for the social and ecological damage, such as the consequences of resource extraction and exploitation, are not the ones who suffer from the effects. Moreover, the costs do not occur in the proximity of those responsible but ELSEWHERE. We would like to argue that ideology is crucial for the habitual and emotional cut-off from this ELSEWHERE and thereby for the stabilization of the imperial mode of living.

In our contribution, we will frame imperial lifestyles as a problem of global justice, i.e. as concerning questions about the distribution of costs and benefits, about mutual recognition, and fair participation among individuals with equal moral worth as they co-inhabit the earth. While the basic debate in this field revolves around theoretical arguments that either support or refute such a cosmopolitan perspective (e.g. Pogge 1992; Nagel 2005; Young 2006), here, we will rather ask about the spatial logic that engenders the actual discrepancy between this moral standard of equal rights and reality. In doing so, we claim that the notion of ELSEWHERE as Brand and Wissen put it plays a central role in understanding the conditions

under which this grossly unjust global separation between responsibility and effect can be stable. Already *Hürtgen* (2021) in her response to the book turned to this point when she asked, where this ELSEWHERE would actually be located, i.e. whether the downsides of imperial lifestyles are really only found in the global South. We, in contrast, like to frame the question in a different way and, rather than addressing the 'where', want to ask about the 'how' of ELSEWHERE. How is it produced and re-produced? What are its implications? And, ultimately, how can it be challenged or overcome? Thinking about this ELSEWHERE, on the one hand, means addressing a certain spatial logic and is therefore an immanently geographical question. On the other hand, it focusses on the underlying conditions for the reproduction of injustice. ELSEWHERE is not a merely spatial category to be measured in physical distance, but rather a mode of thinking and a recurring pattern in what *Fladvad* (2017) has called the topologies of justice, i.e. the way that claims for justice construct particular relations of rights and responsibilities between certain individuals and groups. In other words, the creation of ELSEWHERE lies at the heart of the ideology that makes imperial lifestyles possible.

In the following, we will first establish the concept of communities of justice that determine the boundaries of moral responsibility. Then, we will ask about the global spatial logic that underlies the course of these boundaries as they are experienced in everyday life. The Westfalian system of sovereign nation states is its main component but certainly not the only one. Finally, we will discuss current attempts to challenge this spatial logic as well as their potentials and limitations.

2. Communities of justice

According to *Fraser* (2009: 48), debates about justice occur on two distinct levels: On the one hand, there are deliberations about 'normal justice', which are located within a set of mutually shared assumptions. There can be disagreement, whether certain principles should or should not apply in a specific case. Nevertheless, the discussants recognize each other as legitimate voices in a commonly shared field of responsibility and fairness, i.e. they belong to the same community of justice. Ideal cases of 'normal justice' are appeals to the court: Two contestants turn to a commonly shared law in order to determine wheth-

er a claim is justified or not. This law should provide mechanisms that, for instance, translate responsibility into accountability. However, since any actual concept of justice presupposes a shared ground and draws a line separating legitimate and illegitimate voices, the notion of community of justice should not be restricted to formal law.

Debates that lack such a common ground, on the other hand, *Fraser* (2009) calls 'abnormal justice'. They concern questions of framing those very communities of justice, in the first place. The question that is at stake in such cases is, who can legitimately have a voice when it comes to claim justice. Who can appeal to which court? What set of standards should be applied? These questions deal with the topology of justice in that they concern the ability to have a voice in the debate about justice. They deal with, as *Arendt* (1991) has put it, 'the right to have rights'. Communities of justice in general terms are defining the area of application of a hegemonic discourse of justice. Beyond it, there is no recognition of legitimate voices. Ideologies, like in the case of racism, sexism, or speciesism, can provide us with such sharp lines separating 'true' subjects of justice from illegitimate intruders with unsubstantiated claims.

Communities of justice are still mostly conceptualized within national boundaries, despite the declarations on human rights and various other attempts by the UN and other international organizations to establish global law. Borders function as a powerful naturalized and hegemonic frame of our political thinking and, regularly, also of our social and normative belief systems (*Bergholz* 2018). Later we will come back to this ideological function of the Westphalian system, i.e. the system of 'sovereign' nation states.

Another strong type of border separating different communities of justice is, of course, the generational divide. In times of socio-ecological crisis and climate change, intergenerational justice is a crucial aspect of environmental and climate justice when our today's imperial modes of living are harming a livable environment of future generations (*Forsyth* 2014). However, since *Brand* and *Wissen* only marginally deal with this dimension of externalization, we will also largely leave it out of our considerations, knowing about its importance and the complex ethical discussions that it entails.

Finally, framing the boundaries of communities of justice might not absolutely isolate against the perception of any condition beyond that line. In times of global media coverage consumers are constantly confronted with information about the living conditions of people ELSEWHERE. Nevertheless, these information lack the capacity to touch the moral feeling. Inflicted misery and suffering might not be seen as a reason for moral outrage but instead as a cause for feeling pity or as a technical question of poverty alleviation or disaster relief. In short, the border of my community of justice is the border between here and ELSEWHERE.

3. ELSEWHERE: The production of spatial distinctions by regimes of attention

When *Brand* and *Wissen* start out to explore their concept of imperial modes of living as a spatial category their main distinction is that between the global North and the global South. However, they already suggest that this distinction is not totally clear cut. We also want to stress that the spatiality of imperial lifestyles is much more complex, relational and performative than to be explained by just pointing to these broad categories. What is more, in resting upon fixed cardinal points, this distinction bears the air of geographical naturalness and, thus, can easily be misunderstood in terms of a spatial determinism.

Distance and the distinction between here and ELSEWHERE are not a function of spatial distance in the first place. The apartment next door might be very near from the standpoint of objective space. However, from the standpoint of spatial experience, it is distant and whatever happens there happens ELSEWHERE. The toilet flush does not carry the waste far away, but, first and foremost, removes it from sight. We think that from a geographical standpoint it is productive to ask about the specific regional constellations and spatial logics that create this ELSEWHERE on different scales. What are the correlates to the apartment wall? How are they built and kept stable?

On a global level, it might be a good idea to resort to the central idea of *Wallerstein's* (2005) world systems theory and its political geographical interpretation by *Taylor* (1988): that the world has to be conceived of as one system of mutual interdependence that – although being one whole – creates internal inequalities and is basically nurtured by the relation between

its exploitative and exploited parts. Furthermore, it is this very mechanism of dividing the whole system into compartments that constitutes its basic mode of functioning.

The World-Systems Theory sees two features of the system as built in shock absorbers: the semi-periphery and the Westphalian system. Firstly, there is the semi-periphery that is situated between the exploitative center and the exploited periphery where it plays a double role: it exploits the periphery while at the same time being exploited by the center. Thereby it diverts the attention from the real patterns of exploitation, clouds the actual responsibilities, and enables lateral moral movements. While in today's world of fragmented development, it is pointless to identify whole countries that fulfill the role of a semiperiphery, nevertheless, it might be a productive task to search for the entities that today fulfill the systemic role of a buffer and a transmission belt between the center and the periphery. These entities in our fragmented world do not correspond to the borders between center, semi-periphery and periphery that *Wallerstein* (2005) imagined. Today, we are rather faced by complex relations of exploitative centers and exploited peripheries that can exist in physical proximity or within the very same space at different times.

Furthermore, it is crucial to think about center and periphery in alternative ways and to find concepts that are able to follow the dynamic configurations of today's centers of power: In his work on the logic of speed, *Virilio* (1993) describes a 'geometry of power' that manifests itself beyond periphery and center in a 'nodalisation' of society. The nodes within a networked world would thereby form new centres, but the idea of a global society without or with equal centers is misleading, since recentralization always occurs when one intersection is stronger than others. *Virilio* (1993: 43) writes:

It is claimed that in networks there are several centers. However, this is false, the center shifts, but it is always somewhere. (...) Rather, nodalisation replaces centralisation and lets us enter into a different geometry of power that can become much more dangerous to democracy than the centre/periphery relationship.

In *Virilio's* vision it becomes increasingly difficult to place protest or criticism in the right place and to claim responsibility in today's flexible, multipolar

power structures. A highly visible center of power would offer attack surfaces for counter-movements, whereas in a network with flat or dissolving hierarchies and dynamic power structures that are constantly reforming, it becomes increasingly difficult to form a counter-pole. In effect, this could be a dangerous aspect for democracy and, in our case, aspects of procedural justice and could contribute to the stabilization of the imperial way of living.

The other powerful mode of subdivision is, as already mentioned, the Westphalian system of nation states. It divides a world of intensifying global interrelations and interdependencies into territorial containers, that are to be thought of as sovereign and independent, which they clearly are not. Although this might be apparent to almost anyone, nation states still are the main ground on which territorial communities of justice are established. Thereby, they not only separate responsibility from accountability before the law. What is more, they constitute the ideology that renders the effects of one's own daily practices morally irrelevant and invisible as long as they occur beyond the national border.

However, *Hürtgens* (2021) is right to point out, that nation states are not homogenous but increasingly divided entities in which imperial modes of living and the population groups and territories affected by them can coexist within common national borders. Within nation states (and supranational entities such as the European Union) the construction of the 'internal' ELSEWHERE reflects societal power relations and the associated strategic and discursive selectivity of the state (*Jessop* 2010). The strategic selectivity reflects power relations and the influence of societal actors on certain state apparatuses. It can be described as the state preferences in terms of policy and spatial planning decisions. The ELSEWHERE in this context are areas affected by open pit mines, waste depositories, power plants, industrial areas, transport infrastructure that have huge environmental impacts and which provide either services, products, or the energy that are required to maintain the imperial mode of living. The workforce and the population in adjacent villages, cities and residential areas is disproportionately affected by such activities that permit a good living based on consumerism. The ELSEWHERE and prior planning decisions are backed and performed by certain discursive selectivities that shape possible futures (e.g. the use of open pit mines for coal fired power plants vs. decentralized renewable supply

structures), subjectivities and arguments and "eliminate inappropriate alternatives" (*Jessop and Oosterlynck* 2008: 1159).

Finally, the production of ELSEWHERE also can take place on a micro-level: like in Latin American cities, for example, where the middle class has adopted a lifestyle that oscillates between gated communities, air-conditioned office buildings, and shopping centers (*Short and Martinez* 2020). Furthermore, separation does not only occur in space but also in time: by the time, most academics start their working day at the university, the cleaning staff has already left the building.

It should be clear that these mechanisms do not affect our abstract knowledge about actual interdependencies and responsibilities. Rather, they provide a structure of taken-for-grantedness, in which it requires active work to draw attention towards these relations when the 'normal', default way would be to ignore them. As *Hannah* (2019) has pointed out, attention is a very scarce resource whose distribution has become a central factor for the spatial and temporal structuring of society. Thus, ELSEWHERE is produced not just by walls and borders but, first and foremost, by the regime of attention and ignorance that go along with them. This ignorance is actively supported by the nature of ideology that is clinging to narratives of a "good living" that are based on consumerism and "disavowed enjoyment" (*Vighi and Feldner* 2007: 145).

4. Challenging ELSEWHERE

Considering this diagnosis of imperial modes of living and the spatial constellations that enable them, what, then, might be promising avenues by which this regime of attention and thereby the re-production of ELSEWHERE can be challenged? Surely, the impulse to question the existing compartmentalized communities of justice and to call for their expansion is clearly a cosmopolitan one in its essence and not new. Nevertheless, calling for an end to the Westphalian system of nation states and for unlimited international solidarity is still an unrealistic claim. Rather, we must look for specific channels that cut across the existing territorial communities of justice and that rather establish alternative ways to determine, who has a voice in a certain deliberation.

Those groups who are more and more affected by the imperial mode of living and by ongoing socio-ecological crises, do not just accept their role as the 'weak losers' of globalization and climate change anymore (Fladvad et al. 2020). Rather, based e.g. on arguments of climate justice and responsibility they increasingly draw on the powerful language of rights in order to form new transnational alliances, offer alternatives to the neoliberal world order, and regain autonomy. They organize themselves as a new community of justice beyond the boundaries of the nation state and claim universal and emancipatory rights 'from below'. Transnational peasant organizations such as La Via Campesina claim the universal right to food sovereignty, which includes the right to self-determination of peasant agriculture, rights to agricultural land and a radical democratic reinterpretation of the existing human right to food (Trauger 2014; Fladvad 2017; Hein 2019). In Oceania, too, we observe the emergence of new rights claims. One such case is the low-lying atoll islands of the Republic of Kiribati, whose former government claimed for its citizens the right to 'migrate with dignity' in response to land loss due to sea level rise (Klepp 2018). We call for more attention to these 'geographies of emerging rights' that function as contextual arrangements that have the power to (re)order space, via the 'topologies' of inclusion and exclusion, connection and disconnection, re- and de-territorialization (Fladvad et al. 2020).

Another promising mechanism could be provided by legislation. One such norm could be the all-affected-principle that largely ignores territorial containers (such as nations) and, instead, establishes the relevant community of justice along the line of who is affected. The lawsuits filed against the German government and large energy companies by various people around the world who are largely affected by climate change provide such an example. Another example of a preform of global law could be the use of complaint mechanisms of transnational private certification bodies such as the Roundtable for Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) by environmental and indigenous rights organizations to hold companies accountable for land grabs, human rights violations and biodiversity decline. These new forms of global or transnational law create possibilities to create accountability beyond the limits of the nation state. Today, these legal instruments still have to be rooted either in national legislation or in a voluntary certification scheme and thereby depend on the willingness of either a state or a company to accept a community of justice that

extends beyond its respective boundaries. However, such emerging legal orders, although they are still modest, might constitute promising paths to challenge the production of ELSEWHERE by legal means and can foster a structural change that can, ultimately, alter the current regime of attention, which makes imperial modes of living so stable.

If we decenter our perspectives and learn e.g. from epistemologies of the global South or from a youth movement that is claiming intergenerational justice in a global movement, this might support more 'out of the box thinking' and the formation of communities of justice beyond the given national, generational and social boundaries. As academics, we should push more debates about 'abnormal justice'. This is urgently needed to effectively tackle the imperial mode of living and to open up spaces where we can re-negotiate ideologies and our notions of a 'good living' in times of socio-ecological crisis and climate change.

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