

## **BOOK REVIEWS**

### **A Political Economy of Nuclear Waste and Militarism**

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**Peter Custers, *Questioning Globalized Militarism: Nuclear and Military Production and Critical Economic Theory*, Merlin Press, 2007.**

The first part of this book (“Social Waste and Non-Commodity Waste, and the Individual Circuit of Capital”) will probably be of most interest to readers of this journal. The author argues that Marx’s formula for individual circuits of capital M-C-P-C’-M’ (the initial money capital invested, the commodity inputs purchased with investment capital, the production process, the new commodities produced (C’), and the money appropriated from sales of those commodities, respectively) does not allow a fully adequate comprehension of capitalism. He insists that two further elements must be included: the non-commodity waste produced in the course of commodity production, and the social waste that results when commodities have “negative use-values,” that is, when their use inflicts net harm on society. Custers introduces symbols for these two phenomena, “-W” and “=W”, respectively). Custers takes the pollution inevitably generated as a by-product of the production of nuclear energy as his main example of non-commodity waste. Nuclear weapons provide the paradigmatic illustration of social waste.

Custer’s discussion of the profound environmental costs of each stage in the production of nuclear energy could hardly be more clear or comprehensive. And it could hardly be more important today, when representatives of the nuclear industry and their allies aggressively propose nuclear energy as the “solution” to global warming. Many of us suspect that this is an insane idea. But suspicion is not enough. We need to understand precisely why this is the case. Custers’ detailed and accessible (yet technically sophisticated) analysis of the production of nuclear energy would be a tremendous resource for anyone wishing to become more educated on this issue. His discussion of “discounting” the harms of nuclear energy—a supposedly rational technique of calculation that masks a profoundly irrational indifference to the future well-being of our society—is especially illuminating.

Custers claims that “Non-commodity waste ... does not appear to have been theorized systematically so far by any school within Marxism; to my knowledge, it is largely a blind spot in critical economic theory,” a “blind spot” his own book finally corrects. [p. 61; emphasis in original.] As far as this reviewer can tell, however, all of the major substantial points he makes regarding waste in capitalism can be found in the writings of a number of theorists in the Marxian tradition, for example in the work of James O’Connor, the founder of this journal. In general, Custers does not appear to be very familiar with developments in Marxian theory after Baran and Sweezy’s *Monopoly Capital*. It is true that Custers may be the first person to add symbols representing wastes to Marx’s formula for the capital circuit. But does this truly count as a major theoretical breakthrough? There do not appear to be any theoretical or political issues discussed by Custers that could not be (and have not been) equally well discussed when these symbols are omitted from the representation of the capital circuit. Also, there is at least one very good reason for not including them as part of the

circuit of capital: capital's "default setting" is to ruthlessly ignore the wastes it generates unless it is externally compelled to take them into account by social movements.

In Part Two, Custers turns his attention to "The Military Sector and the Social Accumulation of Capital." He presents an overview of the tremendously important role state expenditures on military arms and salaries have played in the historical development of capitalism. His summaries of the state-run production of warships in Venice, the role of financial capital in funding the British war machine in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the (ultimately futile) attempts of the U.S. state to smooth business cycles through military expenditures, are as clear and comprehensive as his earlier discussion of nuclear energy. He conclusively establishes that no account of economic history that leaves these matters out could ever be completely adequate.

Here too, however, Custers is not a completely reliable a guide when it comes to Marxian theory. He writes, "Whereas Marx seemed to presume that the state has never been a fundamental participant in the social accumulation process, my analysis of the historical data indicates otherwise." [p. 206]. He follows Rosa Luxemburg in criticizing the reproduction schemes of Volume 2 of *Capital* on the grounds that they cannot account for important features of the capitalist world market. More specifically, he insists that the equations Marx develops to represent exchanges between Department 1 (devoted to the production of means of production) and Department 2 (which produces means of consumption) need to be supplemented with terms referring to a third Department, devoted to the production of weapons and military forces. Department 3 is a branch of the state making purchases from the other two departments with funds raised by taxes, or by borrowings from domestic and foreign investors.

In my view, his criticisms of Marx rest on a fundamental misunderstanding of Marx's methodological framework. In *Capital* and other major writings, Marx's project was to reconstruct the essential determinations of capital systematically, beginning from the most simple and abstract determinations, and then proceeding to ever-more complex and concrete levels of investigation. On numerous occasions Marx explicitly and unequivocally affirmed that this project required a separate book on the state. Marx was not able to compose even a draft of this book in his lifetime. But that does not imply that he failed to understand the importance of the state in the accumulation process, any more than the fact that he never wrote his promised book on the world market implies that he failed to recognize its importance. It is also puzzling why Custers ignores the many places where Marx does discuss the role of the state in accumulation, from his early essays on Hegel's Philosophy of Right to his late political essays. And it is puzzling why he so uncritically accepts Luxemburg's views. Many years ago Roman Rosdolsky pointed out that her critique failed to appreciate that Volume 2 of *Capital* was written on a relatively high level of abstraction, and was never intended to be an adequate account of capitalism in all its concreteness. Custers himself cites the book in which Rosdolsky developed this argument.

The final part of the book, "Arms' Exports and the Structure of World Trade: International Circuits of Capital" begins with a lucid summary of the theory of uneven development developed by Samir Amin. Custers then argues that economic imperialism can take other forms besides the disadvantageous terms of trade highlighted by Amin and others. Suppose the terms of trade in the global South improve in certain sectors. This does not

necessarily mean that the promises of global capitalism's apologists have finally been fulfilled. If the gains resulting from the improved terms of trade are devoted to the purchase of arms from the global North, at the end of the day the North still ends up with increased material resources and wealth, while the global South ends up with increased social waste. Custers terms this process "disparate exchange," and he provides compelling evidence that it has become an increasingly important dimension of global trade in recent decades, ruthlessly fostered by the United States. Custers documents, for example, the way Washington elites accepted (or perhaps even encouraged) OPEC's price hikes in the 1970s, confident that a significant portion of the increased oil revenues would flow back to the U.S. arms sector. The increased exports then allowed Department 3 to expand in the U.S. far beyond what the expenditures of the U.S. government by themselves would have allowed.

When a particular government in the global South and a rebel force seeking the overthrow of that government both sell a given region's resources in order to obtain revenues to purchase arms from the North, the tragedy of disparate exchange is compounded. And if these arms are then used in a way that destroys the very fabric of social life in that region, it is appropriate to speak of a new form of enslavement. The relevance of these theoretical points to contemporary Africa is unfortunately all too clear, as Custers establishes in detail.

Custers continues to add symbols to the formula for the circuit of capital almost to the last page of the book. And to the very end of the book, it continues to remain unclear to this reviewer how helpful this is. Is our understanding really advanced by adding an "X" to a circuit in which weapons are produced, sold, and then used? Is our comprehension of the horrors that would result from using nuclear weapons really deepened by adding to the formula for the circuit of capital an extended series of Xs?

But this is a relatively minor quibble. The environmental crises discussed in the beginning chapters of the book, and the humanitarian crises arising from military conflicts in the global South examined at its conclusion, are both deeply rooted in the social relations underlying global capitalism and capitalist states. Custers' book makes these connections clearly and forcefully. For this reason, and many others, it deserves to be read.