

**REVIEW ESSAY****Toward an Ecosocialist Ethnogenesis***Samuel Day Fassbinder***Kees van der Pijl, *Nomads, Empires, States*, Pluto, 2007 and *The Foreign Encounter in Myth and Religion*, Pluto, 2010.**

Perhaps readers of this review, to be published in a journal of ecosocialism, are familiar with Joel Kovel's book *The Enemy of Nature* (2002; 2007). *The Enemy of Nature* is a polemic promoting the idea that if society is not to destroy its ecosystem substrate, it will have to renounce the capitalist norm of exploitation through wage labor and institute ecosocialism. Ecosocialism, for Kovel, is "that society in which production is carried out by freely associated labor and with consciously ecocentric means and ends" (2002, 243). Much of Kovel's book explains the philosophy behind this, but the most important practical question he raises about ecosocialism is how this vision is to come about—where are the energies of ecosocialist mobilization going to arise? One place we can expect to see such energies, Kovel argues, is in the interstices of the state system.

Under conditions of ecological crisis, various ruptures are bound to appear within the late-capitalist world accompanied by some disintegration in the state. In these lacunae, or to use the derisive term applied to countries like Somalia or Haiti, "failed states," we can see the same kind of processes as eventuated in the Paris Commune itself, namely a relative absencing of state authority and within the newly opened space an opportunity for the emergence of a form of the Commons with more or less freely associated labor and ecocentric intention. (2002, 249.)

The perspective of international relations offered by the works of Kees van der Pijl can give us clues about the state system and how the interstices can bring new power relations into the world—power relations outside of the state system (and also, then, outside of the capitalist system supported by said state system). Van der Pijl's tool of inquiry is the *history of foreign relations*, and we can look at this history to understand how ecosocialist social orders might come into being.

Van der Pijl's history of foreign relations starts from capitalist history: for him, the history of the capitalist system is important to understanding international relations, because nations are not just nations. Rather, each nation is embedded in a state-society complex, a set of social, economic, and administrative relations that explain national behavior. In *Transnational Classes and International Relations*, van der Pijl describes two major types of state-society complex within the expanding capitalist system: the "Lockean heartland" (1998, 69) of the global capitalist system, which (taken as a whole) maintains a politics and an economy favorable to capital accumulation, and the "Hobbesian contender states" (1998, 78), which maintain various shades of centralized administration and forced-march authoritarian politics and economics in order to catch up in development with the Lockean heartland.

The works of Kees van der Pijl seem to have acquired their common theme from the chapter on Feuerbach of Marx and Engels' 1847 masterwork, *The German Ideology*. This is to say that in van der Pijl's works, a general history and prehistory of the capitalist system as a whole is sought through categorizations of the various periods of human history. His history involves holistic readings of the material, cultural, and social situations in which the human race finds itself in each part of the world in each era of history. It also involves the lumping together of similar attributes in

the form of tendencies. Just as Marx and Engels grouped history into periods based on each period's supposed concept of property (1970/1847), van der Pijl groups capitalist history into different forms of capital accumulation (1998, 55-57), each of which was ascendant in a different period of capitalist history. *Transnational Classes* provides an overview of van der Pijl's project as a whole; his more recent masterwork, *Global Rivalries from the Cold War to Iraq*, published in 2006, concentrates in this regard upon post-World War II history.

Van der Pijl's two most recent books are "part of a planned three-volume project entitled Modes of Foreign Relations and Political Economy" (2010, vi) that focuses primarily upon the roots of modern society in pre-capitalist (which for van der Pijl means before 1688) historical periods. The first volume, *Nomads, Empires, States* (2007) seems to have been inspired by Benno Teschke's tour-de-force history of foreign relations in *The Myth of 1648*, which argues that the capitalist system grew from a system of international relations that was distinctly pre-capitalist and only developed into the capitalist system "under the modernizing pressure created by the new British state/society complex" (2003, 12). *Nomads, Empires, States* takes Teschke's exposure of the premodern in international relations a step further, through further exploration of the prehistory of both the capitalist system and of international relations. In sum, it's a masterwork that brings the concept of stages of history into the field of foreign relations in a novel way. Van der Pijl proposes, in the vein of *The German Ideology*, that history can be divided into stages according to different modes of foreign relations, each ascendant in its own time, approximately as follows:

- 1) The earliest mode of foreign relations to appear historically is that of tribal relations, relations of economy, physical power, and of control over territorial space between different tribes.
- 2) Later, then, one sees empire-nomad relations, relations as such between empires (with largely sedentary populations) and nomadic groups, which tend to be recruited as warriors by the empires themselves.
- 3) In relatively recent history the rise of nation-states can be charted, in which territorial jurisdiction is explicitly mapped out, defense is left to military institutions, and exchange is mediated by national laws.
- 4) In post-World War II history (with antecedents in the League of Nations), a multiplicity of institutions of global governance can be said to have arisen in order to mediate and coordinate the various national initiatives within a global economic and political world order.

Van der Pijl aims to historicize his own field, international relations. His intention in *Nomads, Empires, States* was "to show that the world order of sovereign states is only one historically specific form of foreign relations" (2010, vi), and with *The Foreign Encounter in Myth and Religion*, he "analyzes the mythical and religious articulations of tribal and imperial foreign relations, which antedate relations of sovereign equality" (2010, vii). *Nomads, Empires, States* does, indeed, cover a broad sweep of world history, from the prehistoric origins of humanity to the post-9/11 world; its last, fifth chapter, "Worlds of Difference," shows readers how the world of global governance has not completely triumphed over the earlier worlds of empire-nomad relations and of tribal relations. We live in a world of more-or-less failed global governance. Indeed, van der Pijl shows how the underdeveloped world experiences revivals of tribalism, while global governance, such as it is, milks the world for profits for the rich few who benefit from empire. This pushes much of the world's population to become nomadic, migrating to the global North in search of subsistence wages (think, e.g., Turks looking for work in northern Europe or Mexicans working in the United States).

In pondering this material, it's valid to ask why ecosocialists should care about ancient history. There are books in which the connection between environmental reckoning and ancient history is obvious. In Sing C. Chew's *The Recurring Dark Ages* (2007), for example, we are told that the collapse of ancient civilizations as far back as 2200 BCE was connected with phenomena of soil depletion and climate change. The van der Pijl volumes are not like that, though. They point readers to focus upon the past 500 years—the era of the biggest transformation of planet Earth in all of human history—to better understand the enormity of the crisis of the present day and to redeem world society through an ecosocialist diagnosis of its ills. In this regard, *Nomads, Empires, States* explains Europe's rise as a world-conquering power (the ethnogenesis of the West) in terms of the outcome of the competition of European claims to global empire in early modernity, resulting in the creation (in England) of the "Lockean heartland" (2007, 143) of multinational, capitalist society. Van der Pijl's recent work, then, is deep social analysis, placing ethnogenesis and foreign relations at the center of human development, with ancient history providing the backstory of this human development.

Van der Pijl notes that much of the ancient world came to be dominated by agricultural empires, each of which could establish limited domains over the world's land mass. Outside of those empires, however, were frontiers, which contained nomadic populations that were both valued and despised by the empires for their military prowess. In the Middle Ages populations of human beings arose that combined the sedentary and urban qualities of the residents of the agricultural empires with the warrior attributes of nomadic populations. For van der Pijl, the empire of Western Christianity, the Catholic world of that time, was unique because of its religious nature (i.e., the separation of Papal authority from secular kingship), its employment of converted nomads (e.g., the Normans) as frontier warriors, and its creation and employment of migrant populations (e.g., the Crusades).

The empire of Western Christianity thus combined the most dynamic aspects of both empire and nomad social formations, and was thus a staging point for the eventual conquest of the oceans by Europeans in the New World. In this way, European empires claiming global domain were created and constituted the ethnogenesis of the West. Today we experience the fallout from the conquering-European social form in terms of the conflict of civilizations as described by Samuel P. Huntington, and in terms of neoliberal globalization, with the U.S. as the lead military entity and the Europeans and Japanese as supporting actors.

Meanwhile, amidst the current development of global governance as such—i.e., as the scaffolding for the imposition of the cultural relations of the West upon everyone else—van der Pijl suggests in *Nomads, Empires, States* that one can observe the recurrence of tribal foreign relations among the dispossessed peoples of the world. One can see this in the various tribal conflicts raging around the world today, from the former Yugoslavia to the religious conflict in Iraq to the factional war in Afghanistan, although much of what is called conflict is often inflamed by the intervention of entities outside of the tribal conflict per se. One example van der Pijl gives of tribal foreign relations in the world today is the persistence of social segregation in race relations in the U.S.

In the end, then, van der Pijl suggests a global program for the assertion of autonomy and human rights that might be applied in the cultural and political contexts which *Nomads, Empires, States* has fleshed out so well. One can see from van der Pijl's description (2007, 198-200) how what he calls "nomad routes to global governance" could result in a world-society at harmony with the

natural world. The reordering of human relations, and especially of foreign relations, is key to van der Pijl's vision of a less catastrophic, more ecosocialist, world: "Once difference is appreciated as a resource for internal self-reflection and social criticism... it will contribute to overcoming the foreign as an exploitative set of relations." (2007, 274.)

*Nomads, Empires, States*, then, is a book rich in interdisciplinary thought, well-suited to the project of ecosocialism even though its author is a specialist in foreign relations. *The Foreign Encounter in Myth and Religion*, the second volume in this project, can be read as a brilliant, if not-so-easy-to-follow, appendix to *Nomads, Empires, States*. In this essay I am suggesting such a reading, because the later book borrows and adorns the theoretical framework of *Nomads, Empires, States*.

Van der Pijl gets much of his inspiration for *The Foreign Encounter in Myth and Religion* from the discussions of myth and religion in the work of Georges Dumézil, which focused on the role of mythology in legitimating the social order, and from the wide-ranging interdisciplinary history of Daniel Lord Smail, author of *On Deep History And The Brain*. As van der Pijl suggests, "all historical societies rely on some form of transcendent logic to legitimate their political-economic order and motivate people to abide by its routines" (2010, ix). This transcendent logic is, for van der Pijl, reflected in mythical life, in which (quoting Victor Turner) "every opposition is overcome or transcended in a recovered unity... as a means of putting at the service of the social order the very forces of disorder that inhere in man's mammalian constitution" (2010, 8).

Thus, in his introduction, van der Pijl suggests a vast subject matter of the influence of religion, myth, and philosophy upon foreign relations (and its cultural penumbras) applied to various aspects of human civilization throughout all of history. The narrative of this book adheres to the general pattern that the relationship between philosophy, politics, and religion in any given society will loosely determine its foreign relations. This is meant broadly to include each society's outlook upon war, hierarchical order, attitudes toward human rights, and other aspects of internal as well as external politics as they in some way indicate the foreign. Van der Pijl's narrative here is very heavy with detail, and it may take a number of readings of this book to get its points. There are chapters titled "Tribal Foreign Relations and Mythical Ancestry" and "Sedentary-Nomad Encounters in Myth and Religion,"—the second of which deals with Sumerian polytheism, Judaism, and Islam. For the Jews, foreign relations are largely influenced by the myth of the chosen people, by the identity of the Israelites as a "coming together of different Semitic-speaking tribes under a common religion" (van der Pijl 2010, 55), and by the conversion of nomadic groups to sedentary agricultural life under the kingdoms of Saul, David, and Solomon. For the Muslims, "God donates the world in its entirety to the Muslims" (2010, 68), and believers have the duty to spread the creed through the doctrine of jihad (van der Pijl 2010, 78). However, the doctrine of jihad operates neither on behalf of a particular tribe nor as part of the spread of any empire.

Chapter 3, "Warrior Heroes in the Indo-European Lineage," covers Hinduism (both mythical and in terms of present-day Hindu fundamentalism) and (interestingly enough) the influence of Nordic polytheism on Nazi ideology. Here, also, van der Pijl argues for the relevance of warrior heroes to the logic of imperial expansion, which is the legacy of our civilization:

The religion of the West is Christianity, but in the nineteenth-century imperialist conjuncture, the hand that held up the banner of the gospel, was also trained in the school of Greek antiquity. Daring and cunning, alien to the teachings of Jesus, must be traced to this particular source as much as to the toughening of European attitudes in the Crusades and the Reconquista. (2010, 102.)

Here van der Pijl suggests that the traditions of ancient Sparta, as such, were imparted to “those destined to become the Anglo-imperial ruling class” (2010, 103).

Chapter 4, “Imperial Cosmologies and the Nomad Counterpoint,” discusses in great detail the relationship between Buddhism and the Chinese empire. Buddhism is represented as a frontier phenomenon, invading China from outside—one expression of this is the present-day attempt of the Chinese government to control Tibetan Buddhism, represented in *The Foreign Encounter* as the repression of an insurgency. This chapter also contains a short history of Christianity as it survived the Germanic invasions of the Roman Empire through Augustine. Later in this chapter the Crusades, which were accorded such a formative role in *Nomads, Empires, States*, are discussed both as a conflict and as an opportunity for cross-cultural exchange.

The last chapter, “Rival Fundamentalisms on the Imperial Frontier,” brings us to the most important mixing of religion and politics in the modern world, the religious and political conflicts of the Middle East. Van der Pijl tells us: “The establishment of the state of Israel and its continuing colonization of Arab lands, in combination with the increasingly aggressive quest for control of the Middle East’s fossil energy reserves, have mobilized fundamentalist reincarnations of the three religions that have their origin in this region.” (2010, 178.)

The political/religious phenomenon of the Mideast conflict, however, appears as a sort of dead end, in which the project of Zionism in Israel is envisioned to have backed itself into a militaristic, intolerant corner that will end ultimately in tragedy (2010, 190). For the Christians, we are reminded that the Calvinism which currently informs American foreign policy “connects the mental complex of individualized Christianity with the universe of capital” (2010, 181), which then became a struggle to impose capitalism and Christianity upon the world, and ultimately brought the world to the point of George W. Bush’s crusades in Afghanistan and Iraq. Whereas in terms of the Islamic revolt against the West, at his most optimistic van der Pijl suggests:

There are indeed indications of tendencies within Islam which are seeking to transcend the Sunni-Shia divide and unite behind a critique of the Western way of life. Phillips refers (2004, p. 243) to a joint resistance to the commodification of everyday life by capitalist globalization. Mandaville (2001, 2008) emphasizes that the Islamist movement is in the process of bifurcating into a right-wing and a left-wing radicalism and that the left tendency is seeking common ground with the secular left, something which in the context of crisis can only gain in relevance. But this again feeds the long-standing Western policy of playing off different strands against each other. (2010, 222.)

This passage brings to mind the current revolts against undemocratic government in northern Africa and elsewhere, a revolt that appears neither to have been hindered nor helped by Western policy. The ethnogenesis that we can see, for instance, in the movement that toppled the Mubarak regime in Egypt appears to have been centered around democracy, to be sure, as well as Egyptian patriotism, but also to have been prompted by resistance to the neoliberal policies of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, cited in Atris 2011) that have been imposed on the various countries.

Nevertheless, it should be clear, then, to the readers of these two volumes that the project of changing the world will need a project of ethnogenesis of its own, or perhaps a thousand such projects. If anything, a reading of *The Foreign Encounter in Myth and Religion* will remind us of that.

At the end of his earlier work *Global Rivalries from the Cold War to Iraq*, van der Pijl glances at the ecological and populist projects in his argument that the course of globalization pursued by the West has led to a “global state of emergency” (2006, 407). These projects do not appear in *The Foreign Encounter in Myth and Religion*, except perhaps for certain hints here and there that there are ecological and humanistic tendencies in religion, such as the enticing notion on page 150 that “Buddhism, like Christianity and Islam, can be interpreted in socialist terms.” Environmental radicals, then, might urge van der Pijl to go back to writing about the context of the global state of emergency as it appears in his earlier works, because such writing brings readers the history of foreign relations couched in terms of ecosocialist remedies for the existing world order as it moves into further tragedy.

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