Capital, State, Empire
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The United States presents the greatest source of global geopolitical violence and instability. Much of this comes from the state's security apparatuses. For example, just in the early part of the twenty-first century, 150,000 troops and thousands of contractors did little to build regional stability in Iraq. Instead, around 10 million Iraqis require humanitarian assistance, another 3.4 million are internally displaced, and according to the Lancet Study, between 2003 and 2006 around 650,000 violent deaths can be attributed to the US invasion (Burnham et al. 2006). In fiscal terms, the Congressional Budget Office estimates that by 2017 the Iraq War will have cost the US over $2.4 trillion, while the Watson Institute at Brown University arrives at a figure of $4.79 trillion and counting, when one includes US wars in Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, as well as Homeland Security (Crawford 2016). This outcome was worse than most anti-war protestors predicted. The scale of this disaster is even greater when one considers that this destabilization is a contributing factor in the Syrian Civil War.

Domestically, in direct violation of legal limitations, the National Security Agency (NSA) has conducted mass surveillance to assemble electronic dossiers
on nearly every US citizen. It is almost impossible not to do so, given that the agency scrapes 1.6 per cent of all internet traffic (The Economist 2016). When confronted with evidence, the agency denies these programs in front of elected representatives. Assisted by extraordinary rendition, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) undertook torture programs at black sites, lied about it, then wiretapped and attempted to erase Senate investigators’ records (US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence 2014). The Justice Department has refused to charge the officials involved therein. Similarly, Homeland Security and the State Department’s various security projects have blurred the lines between foreign and domestic populations, thereby eroding civil liberties. In contradistinction to their treatment of whistleblowers who have revealed the extensive civic harm caused by these activities, these departments are hostile to public accountability and open court proceedings.

On the theme of prosecutorial inaction, the Justice Department has refused to prosecute the bankers involved in the widespread financial fraud that triggered the 2008 recession: ‘Too Big to Fail’ became ‘Too Big to Jail’. Yet, between the Troubled Asset Relief Program, the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act 2008, the Presidential Task Force on the Auto Industry, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act 2009 and quantitative easing, the US has spent around $6 trillion to limit the harms caused by the financial sector. However, most of this public spending went to the already rich. Between 2010 and 2012, the US experienced the greatest ever increase in social inequality, drastically increasing the wealth gap between the 0.1 per cent and everyone else.

This jump is worrying, but it is also a continuation of a longer trend leading simultaneously to capital concentration and pauperization. Aided by productivity gains born from information technology, the US economy has doubled since 1980. So relative to 1960, a typical US worker is twice as productive, but real median wages are almost flat, if not declining in some sectors. About a quarter of US jobs pay an hourly wage that could not support a family of four above the poverty level. Millions of Americans can hardly afford either suitable healthcare or adequate food. Effectively, labour’s situation has worsened since the 40-hour work week was established in the 1940s because for many occupations a 40-hour work week does not provide a living wage.

Not only are workers paid less, capitalists have structured and manipulated their relationship with the state to ensure they pay minimal taxes. One major consequence of this arrangement is that the state cannot undertake sufficient welfare redistribution, nor provide sufficient public goods, and this has facilitated a massive transfer, an appropriation even, of wealth to the ruling class. The degree to which the US is committed to private property cannot be disentangled from the comparatively weak institutional social welfare system. Instead, families, civil society, and charity carry the welfare burden. As the adage goes, ‘God and guns fill in for the welfare state.’ But Homeland Security is not social security. So while workers are producing more value, the benefits of
their labour cannot be seen by them, and it has not been evenly translated into broad socio-economic upliftment.

This is unsurprising given that American party politics is in the pockets of Wall Street and districts are gerrymandered into stalemate. Campaign finance regulations mean that the ruling class controls the barriers of entry to political office, and so running a campaign is so costly that even well intentioned advocates bend to the wishes of funders and donors. The electorate know this and so consistently regard politicians with disdain. Nevertheless, they are so ill-informed about first causes, that they cannot even comprehend how these various parts fit together to form a whole oppressive social structure, meaning they are hard pressed to resist class warfare ‘from above’.

With such conditions, policy discussions have degraded to the exchange of talking points, misrepresentation, and disinformation. American party politics is nothing but a parade of wilful ignorance, avoidance, and hawkishness. Take environmental issues for instance. While nearly 70 per cent of Americans acknowledge that Earth’s average temperature is increasing, less than half attribute this to human activity. Conversely, as of April 2013, only a third of Americans believe that global warming is a very serious problem (PEW 2013). This finding came in the same month as CO$_2$ passed 400 parts per million (NOAA 2013,) and the most comprehensive study of near 12,000 papers found that of the articles that took a position on Anthropogenic Global Warming, 97 per cent endorsed the theory (Cook et al. 2013). Similar dynamics are in play in almost any social issue. Capital speaks while the working class is silenced.

The Supreme Court of the United States is of little help. The 2009 Citizen’s United decision, while holding that political speech is ‘the means to hold officials accountable to the people’ and ‘indispensable to decision-making in a democracy’, perverts it by adding that ‘this is no less true because the speech comes from a corporation’. Couched in the rhetoric of rights, but aware of the consequences, the Court justified its decision in the utility of corporate speech to the public exchange of reasons. But this is nothing but an alibi for increasing corporate influence in political affairs. For instance, 50 senators who stalled gun control measures in 2015 received a combined total of over $27 million for political expenditures from firearms lobbyists.\(^1\)

Elsewhere, Silicon Valley is producing tools for mystification and oppression. By stock market value Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Microsoft and Alphabet are some of the most valuable firms in the United States.\(^2\) But this wealth comes from massive unpaid labour as users unwittingly turn themselves into commodities.\(^3\) As Farhad Manjoo (2017) notes, it also comes, ‘from their control of the inescapable digital infrastructure on which much of the rest of the economy depends—mobile phones, social networks, the web, the cloud, retail and logistics, and the data and computing power required for future breakthroughs.’ Knowing this, in 2015 the Department of Defense (DoD) established a venture capital fund, the Defense Innovation Unit, to help accelerate the production and testing
of specific kinds of artificial intelligence research. It is these kinds of software that are intended for robotic humanoids like the Atlas, a robot produced by Alphabet-owned Boston Dynamics (Markoff 2016). Publicly, it stated that these autonomous robots are intended for disaster response scenarios or space travel. However, given that Boston Dynamics is a weapons manufacturer that tests technology with DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency), the door is open for military uses. So not only do these digital technologies companies shape everyday perception, collude to suppress wages and destroy public good, they cooperate with state security forces and are becoming arms manufacturers. This aspiration is of utmost concern because it leaves the US ripe for tyranny.

Making sense of the devastation in American social life requires seeing how a coercive security apparatus marching to the metronome of capital rules over those US citizens battling the civil powers that oppose it. And because of the central place of the US in the international political economy, this dynamic is at the heart of a global ‘democratic recession’ occurring in the early twenty-first century (cf. Diamond, 2015). Granted, there are virtues in American social life, much as in many societies, but they stand adjacent to these social developments. In part, this is indicative of the great American tragedy; a society founded on freedom but built on slavery. The reproduction of this contradiction haunts American history and it appears in the fever of property rights but constant dispossession, or extraordinary wealth with immiserating poverty.

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Presently, US security apparatuses are dramatically reconfiguring. This is for several reasons, many of which I will discuss in the coming chapters, but the most important is what I call the deployment of digital coercion. When I use this term I am referring to the various processes facilitated by digital technologies that greatly enable American rule. This is because these kinds of technologies acutely illustrate how the machinery of governance is developed for—or co-opted by—the state to manage subjects and processes at near unprecedented scale and scope. Working from a position that the constellation of digital coercive practices is central to the social life in capitalism, paying attention to these active relationships, as they are shaped by class struggle, both ‘from below’ and ‘from above’ can tell us much about the tendencies of capital’s rule as it unfolds in the early twenty-first century.

Although present in many places, digital coercion can certainly be seen in the changing nature of warfare. Let me explain. In 1960 Russell Weigley described the ‘American way of war’ a mode of modern industrial warfare employing strategic attrition. First deployed in the American Civil War and constantly refined until the Second World War, this mode of warfare drafted and mobilized citizen-soldiers to leverage and deploy mass-industrial output as unprecedented firepower. However, the development and strategic deployment of
nuclear weapons made total industrial strategic attrition unfeasible between nuclear-armed states. Subsequently, nuclear weapons initiated the shift from the industrial mode of warfare to the political nature of limited asymmetrical warfare.

Along with many others (Boot 2003, Echevarria, 2004), I call this reorganization of military strategy the ‘New American Way of War’. I suggest it has several formal features. These are the quest for minimal democratic oversight, computationally aided global dragnet surveillance, automated attempts to avert internal dissent, internal repression of vulnerable populations, and protracted conflicts abroad. While I shall add to these observations in the coming chapters drawing attention to their military nature and political ramifications, my central proposition is that the totality of imperial relations, both foreign and domestic, are geared towards accumulating value, and amongst other process, comes about through dispossession, extraction, and exploitation, themselves amplified by digital coercion that allow for unprecedented reach. I contend that these processes can explain many of the empirical observations about state security apparatuses with which I began this book.

This central line investigating military and information technology is an uncommon albeit one of the most urgent topics for Communication Studies. Sadly, disciplinary stalwarts have made this argument for decades but to little avail. Consider how in the mid-1980s, Vincent Mosco lamented how this area was ‘ignored’ (1986, 76). In early 2017 he has good grounds to come to the same conclusion; that ‘scholars who study media and new communication technology tend to ignore the military in favour of examining social media’ (2017, 1). This oversight is more perplexing considering that the US Department of Defense, with upwards of 1.3 million active service members and augmented with near 750,000 civilians, is one of the world’s largest employers, and certainly the biggest single employer in the US (DoD 2017). Moreover, with a budget of $600 billion in 2015, the DoD is the single biggest purchaser of information and communication goods, and so this is a labour process that warrants focus and critical attention. It is a ‘bureaucratic colossus’. If anything, it is fair to say that Herb and Dan Schiller along with a handful of other researchers are the exceptions to this other disciplinary ‘blindspot’. All in all, Mosco is quite correct to chastise communication researchers for this general neglect. And so what is required is an analysis of the military that understands battlefields as a product of the relationship between war and society as those things themselves are coloured by historical forces. To the extent that this book can do that, I aim to contribute something to this research agenda.

Aside from the aforementioned themes, and to reiterate, the most important area of investigation in this book is the relationship of capital and constraint as it is digitally mediated. Selected aspects of constraint are addressed throughout my coverage of the various topics in this book, and illustrated by cases like state capture, calculated conflict, ghettoization and disposability,
uneven-development, and techniques of ideological manipulation. A focus on cases like this is not necessarily chronological for the simple fact that not all regions are integrated at the same time, nor do all regions require the same kind of control at any given point. Jettisoning periodization allows a methodological suppleness that has the advantage of seeing how various institutional arrangements function within a synthetic whole (cf. Wood 1997, 549).

Accordingly, the aim of this book is simple. It is to plot selected features of the American social structure, demonstrating how a capitalist state creates structural injustices, stratifications, and inequalities. Examining these ‘laws of motion’ further involves a treatment of how intense extraction and exploitation creates surpluses that are then used to fund global indirect and informal rule to ensure American paramountcy and ultimately conducive conditions for capital accumulation. In short, the question of how American capitalism reproduces. Accordingly, it is important to resist bifurcating domestic and international affairs since these rarely act in isolation of one another; instead, this scope can tell us much about the relationship between rulers and ruled irrespective of whether these groups live in the US or elsewhere on the planet.

In the opening chapter, I outline my theoretical approach and defend a materialist critique of digital society, one sensitive to the various components of digital rule like new and emerging labour regimes. In the second chapter, I use a historical narrative of US state formation to discuss selected aspects of state theory. This involves some preliminary discussion of European colonialism in the Americas. Throughout this exercise, I try to balance my attention between dispossession, inter- and intra-class struggle and changing labour regimes. Violence receives a central role because of how it supports the accumulation and dispossession process. A subsidiary goal is to demonstrate the expanding accumulative drive that seeks to get ahead of inevitable capitalist crises, irrespective of whether they occur in fifteenth-century Spain, nineteenth-century Britain, or the twentieth-century United States.

Drawing upon an assessment of recent US military budgets and policy statements, the third chapter examines how the security state configures its security forces for the twenty-first century. Digital technologies like automated lethal robotics such as drones and dragnet surveillance enable the US to increase force projection and the maintenance of an imperial system. Chapter Four turns towards internal patterns of subjugation. While I touch upon recent activism such as Black Lives Matter, prison abolitionists, and the Movement for Black Lives, my main purpose is to look at the salient longstanding repressive elements in the United States, the very structures which these activists contest, all the while demonstrating how the American security state is responsible for, and condones this harassment. In Chapter Five I discuss how imperial organization creates uneven development and then examine the warfare that arises from these conditions. Here I pay attention to how territories contended and defended for access to resources and markets, were then finally incorporated.
into imperial domains. Topics in this chapter include the administration of zones of violence and zones of pacification.

As code conditions the possibilities of so much of social life, it is important for contemporary material analysis. Accordingly, the last chapter addresses what Vincent Mosco termed ‘digital positivism’. Herein, I focus on paternalistic ‘nudges’ predicated upon behavioural economic calculations and bureaucratic approval of big data analysis that informs algorithmic regulation. Injunctions and interjections drawing upon social theory are therefore required to assess how digital technologies of governance and control are used to further capitalist state rule. I conclude with some thoughts on the impact of digital coercion on a labour regime, suggesting that there will be an increase in unfree labour.

I anticipate that American scholars will likely receive this work in similar ways to which European scholars view American studies of their continent, or the ways Africans view European studies of theirs: there is certainly a politics of outsider observation. Still, while I may not have the knowledge of an insider, or be privy to all the subterranean politics within the US social structure, it is nevertheless worthwhile continuing to produce, and insist upon, a Southern literature that makes the North the subject of study, but on Southern terms. This is not because the North is the sole site of history. On the contrary, to my mind, this is a complimentary component of understanding the imperial experience in the South. As many Southern theorists have shown, colonized spaces were (and are) experimental sites for rule, military techniques and scientific practice, or have made clear that underdevelopment is an intended by-product of capital interests in the dominant metropoles (cf. Connell 2007). Insights like this underscore that the South has a capacity to write directly and plainly about the sites where global oppression and exploitation is initiated. So all this said, my interest lies less in satisfying a US audience by pursuing a pure inquiry into concepts, and more as an exercise of the South ‘writing back’ identifying some of the very features that oppress almost all of us.

In a short book like this one, I cannot marshal all the evidence required to prove conclusively the aforementioned propositions. What I do hope to do is advance them enough that others might find the general conjecture sufficiently compelling to subject it to more scrutiny, lending support where appropriate and pruning where necessary. Discarding and reconfiguring select elements are likely too. In this spirit, there are items I have left unattended lest this become a spiralling multi-volume project. For instance, I hardly raise issues of gender in the US social structure, nor do I discuss domestic gun violence, debates on reparations, or arms manufacturing. The same is true of many more things. This is not absolute neglect stemming from a belief that they do not warrant attention, but rather because of a momentary focus elsewhere. Currently it is the examination of how digital components of the US social structure exacerbate de-democratizing social inequality, jeopardizing basic values and diminishing prospects for human flourishing.