



## Book Review

# Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad

Karuka, Manu. (2019). Oakland, CA: University of California Press. ISBN 9780520296640 (paper) US\$29.95; ISBN 9780520296626 (cloth) US\$85.00; ISBN 9780520969056 (e-book) US\$29.95. 320 pages

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In *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad*, Manu Karuka uses an anti-colonial, feminist and Indigenous framework to critique imperialism in the US and explain the racial and colonial state's entanglement with the modern corporation. Mapping the historical trajectory and ongoing tendencies of this entanglement, the book begins with denaturalizing the existence of the US nation-state as exceptional or permanent. It argues that the US is neither a product of the great intellectual foundations of democracy and liberty, nor the land of trade and discovery. Instead, it is an empire built on reactionary opposition to Indigenous sovereignty and worker struggles, a process that began with the construction and expansion of the first transcontinental railroad in the mid-nineteenth century.

The book aptly begins with some pertinent questions posed by a Cheyenne man to the New York Cooper Union in 1871, "What use have we for railroads in our country? What have we to transport to other nation? Nothing" (p. xi). These questions foreshadow a critique of the colonialist alibi of economic progress offered later in the book. "Railway building," Karuka writes, "augured the introduction of new, hierarchical systems of management tying wages and skills to racial distinctions... Investors on colonial railroads invested in more than the futures of railway corporations. They invested in the futures of colonialism" (p. 42). He tracks this journey of colonization by situating the apparatus of Central Pacific Railroads in relation

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to the colonized Indigenous peoples along the path of the railroad, the exploitation of Chinese workers, the legal provisions in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and the war finance nexus (e.g., as manifest in the Spanish-American War).

Three interconnected concepts undergird the book's arguments: countersovereignty, modes of relationship, and continental imperialism. Karuka argues that the US should be understood as a *countersovereign* entity that has always existed in reaction to the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples and the struggles of workers around wages, technology and labour time. This reactivity took the form of catastrophic violence against Indigenous peoples whose lands these railroad projects were supposed to destroy, and against the racialized Chinese workers who build the railways. *Empire's Tracks'* first chapter builds an understanding of the concept of countersovereignty, and Karuka returns frequently throughout the book to explain the dependence of US imperialism on countersovereignty, for extraction and financialization of Lakota people's lands (p. 70), for Chinese exclusion (p.100), for the military occupation of Cheyenne territory (p. 138), and overall to exert power and raise capital needed for the railroad project (p. 154).

Karuka uses the concept of *mode of relations* (i.e., the production and reproduction of relationships) to move past the mainstream literature, which associates imperialism with the economic order of territories and posits it as an externality. A significant portion of the book closely examines four case studies of Indigenous modes of relationship amongst Lakota, Pawnee, and Cheyenne people. Relating the intimacies of land, people and animals among Indigenous peoples with the lives of Chinese railroad workers, Chapters Four to Seven highlight the often-erased historical connections between the struggles of migrant workers against labour exploitation and self-determination struggles of Indigenous peoples. Karuka consistently asks us to "reconsider what we mean by capitalism by focusing *less* on modes of production and *more* on modes of relationship" (p. 184, emphasis added) suggesting a departure from traditional Marxist scholarship. However, in doing so, the book attributes a quantitative dimension to the modes and assumes these modes as two separate processes. It then raises questions for the readers, especially those interested in contemporary Marxist scholarship about whether these modes are quantifiable at all. Further, what implications does such a quantitative separation of modes have on the dialectical relationship between these modes in a capitalist/colonial political economy?

Drawing upon Lenin's theory of imperialism and DuBois's arguments about colonialism in Africa, Karuka uses the concept of *continental imperialism* to provide a detailed account of how "the frontier dynamic is at the heart of US political economy" (p. 168). Continental imperialism, according to Karuka, proceeds through dislocation, deterritorialization, the colonial relationship of the liberal individual to the space of the putative nation, and active production of ignorance. The railroad corporation was a "core vehicle" (p. 157) for all these processes. To examine the global

character of imperialism, Karuka presents in Chapter Three a broad literature review on railroad colonialism, which traces the history of railroads across Latin America, Australia, Africa and Asia. This chapter serves to critique US exceptionalism, but it falls short of a much needed in-depth investigation of the interconnected past, present and futures of these regions especially given the spatial and temporal transcendence of racial and colonial logics within global imperialism.

Karuka devotes much attention to defining the state's multiplicity, focusing on the intimate relations between its legal and political functions, and the finance capital orchestrated by corporations, which shaped the invasion of America. This relationship between state and corporation is critical for understanding the corporatized origins of today's military and policing systems and their connection with finance capital (i.e., the war-finance nexus). It also helps with understanding racism and colonization as a complex web of processes *within* finance capital, including "shareholder whiteness" (p. 167), monopolization, and overaccumulation of capital.

Karuka's methodology has useful epistemological insights for using archives as a source of data. The book debunks colonial sources (e.g., the census, policy reports) as conjectural rather than factual. Instead, using a historical materialist approach, the book investigates rumours, oral histories, Indigenous art, novels, individual and collective memories as sources of knowledge. Examining the social relations of collectivity, struggles, and violence against people, animals and land provides a robust foundation for understanding capitalist structures as modes of relationship, rather than as modes of production, which indeed marks an important shift in scholarship on imperialism.

In a very detailed epilogue, Karuka solidifies the bridges between the apparatus of the transcontinental railroad of the past, and the contemporary struggles of Indigenous nations, migrant workers and peasants, in order to offer an agenda for anti-imperialist struggles. It reflects on the violent yet free flow of international finance capital today, and grapples with questions of the contemporary urban infrastructures that function as instruments of finance capital, and by extension imperialism. Concepts and strategies important for anti-imperialist struggles, such as "delinking from growth" (p. 36), the relationship between finance capital and fictitious capital (p.150), are briefly mentioned over the course of the book, and arouse interest for further examination.

*Empire's Tracks* is a remarkable piece of scholarship, which has potential to inform activist agendas for anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggles in the US and other colonized Indigenous nations such as Canada and New Zealand. The book comes at a peculiar time, when the world sinks into a global pandemic, worker struggles peak globally, and blockades of railroads and pipelines are tools of resistance against colonization of racialized, Black and Indigenous lands and bodies. It provides a relevant understanding of the

historical processes that must shape our current analysis and strategies of resistance against predatory capitalist and imperialist political economies.