

Parsons, Laurie. 2023. *Carbon colonialism: How rich countries export climate breakdown*. Manchester University Press. ISBN 9781526169181. £18.99.

Reviewed by Ewan Jenkins. Email: [egj1 "at" st-andrews.ac.uk](mailto:egj1@st-andrews.ac.uk)

Parsons (2023) has achieved an enlightening and empathic account of the ways in which globalized production continues its violent and colonial legacy of exploitation in the interests of the imperial core (the 'rich countries' in Parson's subtitle). Intended for popular readership at the consumer-end of the supply chain, the text is light on jargon and intends to document, with extensive empirical support from both statistical analysis and over a decade of fieldwork in Cambodia, the ongoing effects of a global system of accumulation managed in the interests of the center. Novel in this analysis is the focus on hidden environmental impacts that are managed and maintained toward the project of net-zero national balance sheets for the 'rich countries.' Colonial processes of concealment and frameworks of legitimation are the object of Parsons' study, which he frames with two guiding concepts: the "global factory" and carbon accounting. The dual deployment of concealment and legitimation leads to Parsons' definition of carbon colonialism: "the concealment of environmental impacts due to fossil fuels and industrial processes by moving these impacts from one balance sheet to another, or simply by allowing them to fall between the cracks of environmental accountancy" (p. 94).

Concealment is accomplished in three ways: outsourcing, complexity, and greenwashing. Outsourcing refers to the history of rural underdevelopment and the production of the periphery, a well-documented and globalized tendency of capital in its neoliberal phase of production. In Parsons' analysis, outsourcing focuses on the conversion of subsistence farmland into land-for-export and an accompanying proletarianization (my terminology) of the peasantry into industrialized wage-laborers in a neocolonial export economy, employed in often life-threatening conditions in factories and brick kilns. Exporting raw materials always adds less economic value to the host country than to the country which processes, manufactures and resells those materials (p. 29). For Amin (1987), this made it impossible for peripheral economies to catch up or surpass the center without "de-linking" from the global economy. This 'de-linking' then, would appear to be the subject of decolonial, and indeed Marxist thought: de-linking "towards a polycentric world" (Amin, 1987).

Yet, whilst Parsons discusses "decolonizing systems of environmental accounting" (p. 87), "the imagination" (p. 98), and "the mind" (p. 150), there is no acknowledgement of de-linking as a reaction against the violent and exploitative consequences of colonial capital. Rather than de-linking, Parsons instead focuses on what he calls responsibility: "if there is to be any serious effort to address the impacts of the global economy... responsibility... must be the priority" (p. 207). Responsibility cashes out as a call for more governance. More governance runs into the second process of concealment: complexity.

Complexity refers to the invisibility of Global South labor and the commodity itself, subject to partial and incomplete supply-chain monitoring as it moves across borders at different stages of its production. This complexity allows for "control over knowledge of our global factory" (p. 16). This power-knowledge—the ability of governments, corporations, and other economic actors to control the knowledge that is produced and expressed about global production—allows for hideous lies in the name of 'sustainability;' it becomes "possible to proclaim the system just, clean, and fair" (p. 16). This ideological distortion is made possible for Parsons due to the "lack of legal frameworks governing global supply chains [which] means the processes and practices that underpin our lives are in effect owned by no one," so responsibility is "passed up and down the chain ad infinitum" (p. 207). Yet governance of transnational supply chains in the postmodern economy is fraught with real difficulty (p. 66). A combination of physical logistics, cost-effectiveness, and a disciplined workforce concealing their oppression under the surveillance of management all work against the effectiveness of Global North "inspection" of Global South labor practices. Such inspections take on spectacular dimensions (one may think of Shein inviting influencers, as "Shein ambassadors," to a varnished tour of the factory [Shuttleworth, 2023]), or simply be conducted in bad faith, with inspectors incentivized not to find what they are supposed to find.

The main problem Parsons identifies within the "global factory"—defined as an elongated Fordist production line, with freight lines replacing conveyor belts—is its de-spatialization. Where goods produced in the traditional factory could easily be "seen, touched and inspected as they move," such a "visual and physical connection" has been replaced by "check boxes" (p. 65-66). What Parsons' calls the "obscurity of distance" is

his choice problematic of the global factory, a problem which at least in principle capital would look to technology to solve (p. 66). Indeed, Parsons' writes that "despite the power of technology, the obscurity of distance still shrouds what is really happening" (p. 66, emphasis added). This could appear invitational for new forms of surveillance, wearable body-monitors and scanners, and other artifacts of biopower to rediscipline, make transparent peripheral labor, and abolish the distance which makes regulation of global south labor from the center more difficult. And this, collaterally and in principle, would make holding the center accountable, and enforcing their "responsibility," more possible: dispelling concealment in the periphery will dispel concealment in the center and unveil its masked colonial face.

One could take various issues with this reformist solution, but it may also strike as anachronistic to a previous mode of production. As Jameson (2015) convincingly argues, it is the very nature of postmodern commodity production—which often relies on derivatives and other temporary, heterogenous forms of credit which unite various geographies and supply chains in momentary configurations—that makes the kind of regulation possible on a Fordist conveyor belt today impossible. Jameson asks us to imagine an everyday case where a financial derivative could be found in the wild: a US corporation contracting to provide ten million cell phones to a Brazilian subsidiary of a South African firm (p. 117). Such a derivative melds together six different currencies, their exchange rates in perpetual flux, requiring six or seven different insurance contracts – and an equal number of different sites and conditions of production. Such a "singularity" can only be "inspected and analyzed after the fact... there can really be no laws to moderate the dynamics of this kind of instrument" (p. 118). Whatever we make of this pessimism in the face of second-order financial abstractions, the "global factory" begins to appear far more heterogenous and many-limbed than simply a continent-crossing production line.

The third process of concealment is greenwashing. In one of the strongest areas of his discussion, Parsons expresses his conviction that consumer power cannot produce a more ethical or sustainable global economy (p. 58). He notes that corporations now need to maneuver around "far greater scrutiny of a professionalized environmental movement and well-established legal precedents concerning corporate assertions of sustainability and ethics" (p. 60). To tap into the "green" market of consumers, corporations need to ensure that "nothing in their supply chain visibly contradicts their stated sustainability commitments" (60). However, whilst consumer scrutiny may push corporations toward convincing simulation of environmental care and sustainability, advanced practices of greenwashing may just as well commit more resources towards misdirection, obfuscation, corporate responsibility statements, intensive lobbying to remove environmental safeguards, or cultivating the "aesthetics of sustainability" (p. 181) toward a convincing signification—alleviating their consumers' easily satisfied moral concerns—rather than any concrete changes in production. Parsons agrees that ultimately ethical consumption is a red herring that leads well-intentioned consumers down "blind alleys": "it may seem hard-hearted, but taking away the moral pressure valve of the ethical purchase is imperative" (p. 73).

This concealment by greenwashing is accompanied by legitimation practices, where "technical environmental frameworks" set 'targets' and 'safe levels' of environmental harm, including that of carbon emissions. Notably, these frameworks are anachronistic to a previous moment of production: for instance, carbon emissions are accounted for in a "production-based metric," i.e., within one's borders, rather than by a "consumption-based metric," where "emissions associated with imported goods also figure in the total" (p. 95). Accounting frameworks lagging a more advanced mode of production both conceals (outsources emissions and greenwashes) and legitimates itself (accounting as a form of power-knowledge), whilst displacing responsibility for emissions to the Global South. Again, Parsons' views the problem here as the absence of an "inspector whose jurisdiction extends across the length of an international supply chain," leaving a "knowledge-gap" which, whilst well-known to companies and governments, remains unknown, presumably, to consumers. The power which determines such a lacuna of knowledge "acceptable" is what counts as carbon colonialism (pp. 95-96). A notable absence in Parsons' discussion here are the contributions of carbon offsetting markets, carbon-motivated land-grabbing, carbon capture technologies, or environmental racism to a study of carbon colonialism—these receive only passing mention.

Overall, Parsons offers interesting concepts to interrogate the neoliberal globalized economy, though the work suffers with feeling disconnected from Marxist and decolonial literatures, which leaves his account of rural underdevelopment in Cambodia feeling anachronistic and, at times, lacking a critical edge considering the brutality of the realities on the ground. Where national accounting frameworks are deliberately anachronistic to

a previous mode of production—a colonial exercise of power about what is deemed an acceptable knowledge gap—the concept of the "global factory" is anachronistic in the same fashion, ironically simplifying global production processes considerably. The solution of demystifying Global South labor invites problematic technological solutions to re-spatialize production to render it susceptible to discipline and inspection that could lead to a further entrenchment of colonialism. Decolonial authors have long argued for de-linking and other justice-oriented alternatives. The reformist solution of "responsibility" may smack of a Eurocentric solution in the form of extending rights and universalisms outward to the periphery. For political ecologists, the terms "global factory" and "carbon colonialism" might thus require a reconstructive approach but remain open for appropriation and critique by those working in related fields.

References

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Ewan Jenkins is a PhD student in the School of Geography & Sustainable Development at the University of St Andrews, Scotland.