

I.L.A. Kollektiv



AT THE EXPENSE OF OTHERS?

How the imperial mode of living
prevents a good life for all

With a
preface by
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PREFACE

Democratically minded and socio-ecologically conscious individuals are currently transfixed by the troubling developments on the right wing of the political spectrum. Nationalist aspirations, racist ideologies and authoritarian forms of rule are gaining influence. Neoliberal capitalism has lost its aura; there suddenly now seem to be alternatives. Numerous emancipatory initiatives and concrete approaches have made other options possible. We have witnessed the Arab Spring, the occupations of city squares in many countries, left-wing alternative parties (e.g. *Podemos* in Spain), protests against TTIP and CETA, as well as against the mining and burning of coal or against major projects (e.g. Stuttgart 21), local movements such as Transition Towns, urban gardening and repair cafes, as well as proposals to improve social infrastructure, for a decentralised and democratic energy transition and for public transport. And the list is by no means exhaustive.

It was against this backdrop that a group of academics and political activists met in 2016 for a writing workshop they called “The imperial mode of living: structures of exploitation in the 21st century (I.L.A.)”. The term “writing workshop” and the project’s unwieldy name make it hard to truly grasp the energy and dynamism this project unleashed, as well as the scope of the expertise it managed to unite. However, a quick glance at the resulting text, in which the I.L.A. presents the outcomes of this workshop to a broader public, instantly gives you an idea of the great minds at work on this collaboration.

One of the key findings of the project has been that there is not necessarily a link between the current crisis and the rise of the conservative right with its false solutions lacking both solidarity and answers to the true problems and crises. Moreover, there are indications that we can stop the rise of the right. We have progressive alternatives to halt such movements, and it is possible to confront the existing form of capitalism with its increasingly damaging social and environmental impacts. As much as we will need courage and dedication, we also require in-depth analyses. By setting out to dissect the imperial mode of living, i.e. patterns of production and consumption that are built on an unlimited

global appropriation of nature and labour and which produce both tremendous wealth and extreme misery and destruction, this publication provides the latter.

With a wealth of detail, this text identifies and vividly explores the underlying mechanisms. As the following chapters make clear, many people—particularly in the Global North—live by and profit from the imperial mode of living. At the same time, however, this mode of living exerts a certain degree of coercive power that is hard to evade. Changing consumption patterns at the individual level to be more socially and environmentally compatible—although an important strategy—is not enough. The imperial mode of living entails both promise and pressure. It simultaneously expands and limits people’s opportunities. And even in the Global North, an individual’s social status remains an important factor. Class, gender, and race all define the balance between opportunities and pressure. Car ownership rates as well as the frequency with which people fly or eat meat all highlight this fact. High-income (and, frequently, environmentally conscious) groups generally also consume the greatest share of resources and energy.

This publication mainly focuses on how these and other complex issues affect various aspects of our lives. But this is not purely an analytical text. It also explores the true potential of alternative approaches and concepts. Across the world these ideas are gaining ground and providing an emancipatory dimension to people’s justified anger over social injustices, environmental degradation, and a purported “post-political” lack of alternatives. This book is thus directed at all those who are fighting for energy democracy, food sovereignty, a transformation of mobility, and liveable cities—whatever their background or motivation. Next to prudent analysis, readers will find plenty of inspiration for their activism. We therefore hope this fascinating text will be shared widely and would like to thank all of those involved, in particular Thomas Kopp for his enormous contribution to the project.

Berlin, Oregon and Vienna, March 2017

Ulrich Brand, Barbara Muraca, Markus Wissen

An everyday catastrophe

When you open the morning paper, it's hard to avoid that sinking feeling. We are undoubtedly living in difficult times. Bad news follows bad news: financial crises, hunger crises, thousands of people dead in the Mediterranean, climate change and natural disasters, insecure jobs and cuts to social services, and the rise of reactionary and right-wing forces in Europe and the US. At the same time, we are witnessing growing social inequality and an increasing divide in society. Even though the global economy has grown rapidly over the past decades, 766 million people still live in extreme poverty.¹ Whereas in 2010, 388 people owned as much as the poorest half of the global population, by 2017 this figure had dropped to just eight men.²

Seemingly unrelated bad news appears to rain down upon us. This text aims to highlight and analyse the links between a diverse set of concerns and alarming tendencies. Moreover, we want to find out what we can do to counter these worrying developments. Where must we apply pressure to achieve a good life for all instead of a better life for a few? And why is the struggle for a socio-ecological transformation towards a just and sustainable future proving so arduous?

A life at the cost of other people

The rise of right-wing movements and parties shows that many citizens across all social classes have lost their faith in parliamentary democracy. Right-wing populists around the globe have exploited people's fear of being left behind and stoked feelings of insecurity. Simple answers to complex questions are gaining traction. A nationalist revival, stricter border controls and faster deportations of immigrants are to bring security and wealth.

These simple answers, however, do not do justice to the complexity of the problems. But some of the explanations proffered by the left, who simply blame corporations, banks and the 'one percent', are also too simplistic. Instead, we need to carefully analyse whether these diverse concerns share common causes and clarify which structures provide the basis for the injustices of the current system. Our analysis has enabled us to pinpoint a root structural cause of the multiple and connected crises: the *imperial mode of living*. According to Brand and Wissen³ it is *imperial* because this mode of living steadily expands, suppresses other forms of living, excessively exploits nature and human labour and thereby causes inequality of opportunity and unequal access to natural resources. We have chosen mode of

living because this system completely permeates our everyday lives. It is a common thread that runs through our processes of production, laws, infrastructure, behaviour and even our thinking patterns. We expect supermarkets to sell exotic fruits from spring to winter and can have practically any product delivered to our doors at the click of a mouse thanks to Amazon, Zalando, foodora and other websites. We do not need to worry about where these products come from and how they are produced. We expect a stable currency and easy payments. Many countries and regions can only sustain such conditions by implementing the harsh austerity policies dictated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. We can no longer imagine our lives without a smartphone even though this product is often produced in places where exploitation and state repression are rife. We also expect that someone will take care of our elderly relatives. Care work, how-

ever, is mostly provided by migrant staff working under dreadful conditions. Those who have the opportunity continue to receive qualifications in a process of lifelong learning that allows them to actively participate in our career-oriented society; seldom do they question our fundamental societal structures. These traits, which are inherent to our everyday lives, are part of a global economic system that produces severe injustices and ecological damage. It is based on permanent exploitation: of humans by humans, as well as of nature by human-kind.

The imperial mode of living ...

... is based on an unjust distribution of resources

People in the Global North, i.e. those living in the economically strong industrialised countries, consume a disproportionately large share of global resources. The rest of the global population has only limited access to land, water, food, and fossil fuels. Yet also within societies, both in the Global North and in the Global South (GLOSSARY), the high levels of consumption among the wealthy and the vast amount of resources this entails increase their country's ecological footprint (GLOSSARY), whereas people in low-income groups contribute to a far lesser degree. We therefore speak of a *transnational consumer class* (GLOSSARY), i.e. a global upper and middle class that excessively consumes resources and which increasingly also includes people from the Global South.

» Whereas in 2010, 388 people owned as much as the poorest half of the global population, by 2017 this figure had dropped to just eight men.«

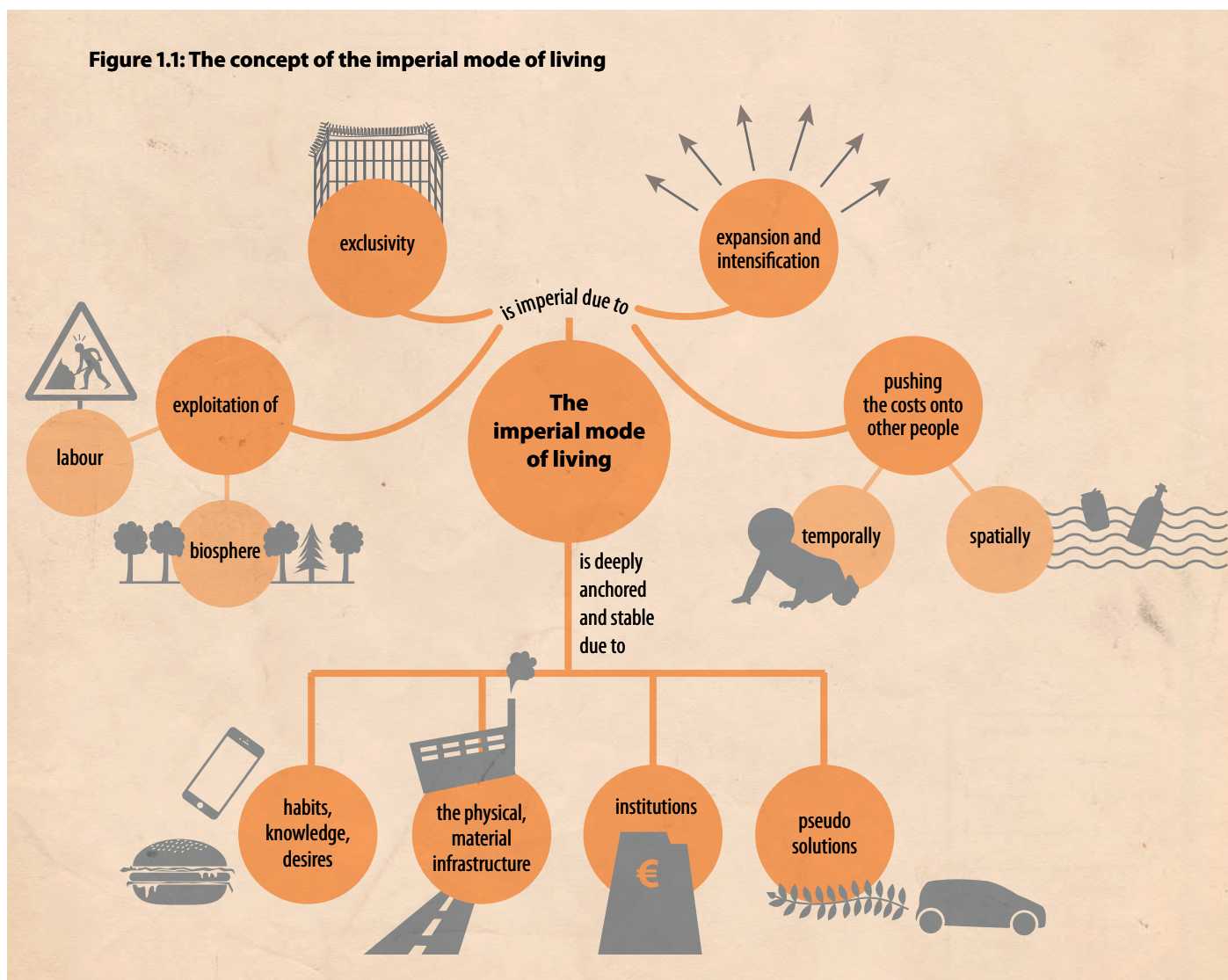
... relies on inhumane labour

The imperial mode of living of this class of consumers is directly related to an imperial mode of production and exploitative labour relations. Extremely cheap products are not purely the result of increasing technological efficiency, but are also mainly the result of global imbalances and hard, poorly paid, and insecure work. Such harsh conditions are also faced by people in Germany, for example, those working in slaughterhouses or restaurants. In Turkey and Bangladesh, entire mines and factory buildings collapse with workers still inside. The low social and environmental standards in many places ensure consumer goods stay easily affordable for a middle and upper class growing throughout the globe. The same job pays significantly less in the Global South than in the Global North. People in the Global North therefore have access to significantly more hours of work—in the form of produced goods—than people in the Global South: working one hour in the Global North allows me to buy a product that would require me to work significantly more hours in the Global South. Many citizens of Europe and North America therefore have the entire world at their disposal, and this is also true when it comes to travel (e.g. applying for visas). In contrast, people in the Global South are often literally penned in by border fences (see infobox on “Freedom of movement”).

... exploits nature

The overexploitation of natural resources is a further injustice that we not only commit against our fellow human beings but against the natural world. ‘Nature’ has an intrinsic value and is not merely a resource for human needs or a dumping ground for waste. It is becoming ever clearer that our modes of living and production, which are based on infinite economic growth, are not feasible on a finite planet. Current extinction rates are around one thousand times higher compared to the time before human influence, and the number of species lost is set to rise.⁴ Since the year 2000, an area of tropical rainforest the size of Germany has been cut down every five years.⁵ Various estimates predict that by 2050 around one billion people could become displaced as a direct result of climate change.⁶ From a historical point of view, human-caused climate change is a product of the Global North’s imperial modes of living and production, a fact we will consider in more detail in the following historical overview. Mobility in our societies is extremely car-centred, every household owns numerous high-energy appliances, and resource-intensive industries, such as steel production and the aviation industry, are heavily subsidised—all of this contributes hugely to global warming. A substantial share of the emissions these activities cause is no longer attributed to the Global North. This is not only because the

Figure 1.1: The concept of the imperial mode of living



INFOBOX

An overview of the imperial mode of living

The imperial mode of living

Our hypothesis is that one of the root causes of our current problems is the global expansion of a profit- and growth-based economic model. However, the global economic system is not a separate, independent structure that exists somewhere ‘out there’; it is deeply embedded within people’s lives.

The imperial mode of living is built on the ideal of a comfortable and modern life based on the permanent availability of consumer goods. In order to make this dream a reality, people around the world have to work hard, mine natural resources and slaughter animals — and they have to do it on a scale that pushes the earth to its ecological and social limits. The consequences are outsourced: to the Global South, future generations and marginalised groups in societies everywhere.

Nonetheless, the desire for and practice of this mode of living is spreading from the North to ever-greater parts of the world, together with its inherent ecological problems and social injustices. We consider the imperial mode of living a norm. It is borne by deep-rooted *notions and ideas* of what is desirable (i.e. ‘growth’ as a personal and economic policy goal), our *physical, material infrastructure* (motorways and coal power stations) and *political institutions* (the European Central Bank, the International Monetary Fund or free trade agreements).⁹ It is clear that multiple elements are at play here, which is why we refer to the phenomenon as a *mode of living* (as opposed to an individual consumption habit or the general relations of production).

Its multiple layers and the tacit but active approval by many people stabilise the imperial mode of living. This results in false solutions for real problems such as climate change (one example is increasing technological efficiency; see infobox “Green economy”). However, there are just as many varied approaches to realising a socio-ecological transformation. People everywhere are politicising everyday life by renouncing their consumption habits or uniting in initiatives, unions, and alliances to fight for the democratisation of institutions and modes of production.

The imperial mode of living: key phrases

The concept of the imperial mode of living creates a link between the individual, the economy, and global problems.

The imperial mode of living is imperial because it grants certain groups an disproportional share of other people’s labour and the biosphere at a global level and outsources the impacts.

The imperial mode of living is on the rise globally.

The state, the economic system, and social consensus consolidate the imperial mode of living.

Mode of living describes a complex web of relationships between individual actions, business, and political institutions.

A socio-ecological transformation has to tackle the imperial mode of living at every level.

imperial mode of living is spreading, but also because the production of many goods is outsourced to countries in the Global South (GLOSSARY: *virtual emissions*). The goods may be produced elsewhere but that does not change whose consumption habits and profit margins the lion’s share of greenhouse gases are being emitted to feed.

... and divides society

Certain people are disproportionately affected by these injustices. Those who have little money or who are discriminated against on the grounds of gender or race suffer more from unjust working conditions, environmental degradation and climate change.⁷ Here the dividing line does not only lie between a wealthy Global North and an exploited Global South: the fault lines also exist within societies. There are those in the societies of the Global South who profit from globalisation as much as there are ‘losers’ in the Global North. Poverty or unhappiness caused by pressure to perform at work,

hypermobility, or fine dust pollution are by no means rare occurrences.

Our internalised imperial mode of living

The imperial mode of living does not stop at our doorstep either; it culminates in many people’s desire for permanent self-optimisation. This is true not only with regard to people’s careers — making more money and moving up the ladder — but also in terms of enhancing efficiency at work and leisure time as an end in itself. The prevailing belief that responsibility lies exclusively with the individual, and not with businesses or the state, drives this trend. Unjust forms of business conduct can then, for example, be blamed on the unethical choices individuals make when they go shopping. People are not sick because they suffer from occupational diseases (or have simply had bad luck), rather it is their own fault because the food they eat is not sufficiently healthy, or because they have not meditated enough or done enough exercise (e.g. to recover from work).



The imperial mode of living as an attempted explanation

The concept of the *imperial mode of living* can help explain why, in spite of increasing injustices, progressive alternatives have so far been unsuccessful. It tries to understand why a *socio-ecological transformation* (GLOSSARY)—i.e. a fundamental change in our society and economy to achieve a good life for all and for future generations—is being blocked. The term was coined a few years ago by the sociologists Markus Wissen and Ulrich Brand.⁸ This text attempts to illustrate how the concept applies to different areas of our everyday lives: our food and mobility, our education system, private finance, care, and the digital world. We ask how the imperial mode of living manifests itself in these spheres and try to ascertain what its stabilising factors are.

Change in sight?

Profit-oriented globalisation (GLOSSARY) reveals and perpetuates itself in our everyday lives, our work, our consumption habits and our ‘normal’ activities and ways of thinking. Only when we become conscious of our problems and their causes can we effect true change. Among many people in both the Global North and South there is an increasing awareness of the problems mentioned.¹⁰ However, it is the classes with the highest incomes and best education that contribute the most to the destruction of the biosphere and the exploitation of people (MOBILITY, and EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE).¹¹ Whereas many in this group tend to buy ecological products, their high income means their levels of consumption are also higher than average.

We are witnessing a significant increase in so-called ‘solutions’ based on consumption. One example is the steadily increasing market share of fair trade products.¹² Or when people pay to offset the CO₂ emissions caused by their flights as well as car or bus journeys. For only a few euros, the company Atmosfair offers ‘CO₂ neutral’ flights.¹³ The developers of the Fairphone strive for production to be as “fair as possible”,¹⁴ which means trying to avoid as far as possible resources from crisis zones and not exploiting employees.¹¹

The approaches these solutions are based on, however, often focus too narrowly on consumption and their scope is limited. People can now decide for themselves whether or not to buy coffee produced through worker exploitation, but exploitation nonetheless remains the norm. In many cases the suggested solutions simply represent forms of greenwashing, as in the case of CO₂ offset payments (see infobox on “Emissions trading and offsets”). An example of one such pseudo solution are Western nations’ attempts to repair the damage caused by their own agricultural policies by providing development aid, for example, food relief. The political strategy behind green growth (see infobox “Green economy”) is also to reduce the impacts of our economic system without fundamentally changing the system itself. The basic structures that pave the way for and promote injustices remain untouched. In most cases, therefore, governments and international organisations

INFOBOX

The dream of a green economy

The green economy (green growth) suggests that we need only make our economy ‘green’ to solve our environmental problems; reducing our levels of consumption isn’t necessary. Proponents of the approach in fact argue the opposite, claiming it will even drive economic growth. To break the link between economic growth and the consumption of natural resources, our fossil fuel-based industry is to be successively replaced by bio-based forms of production. Petrol will be replaced by agrofuels (see infobox on “Agrofuels”), coal by hydro power, and so forth. Market instruments such as emissions trading are a key element in such concepts (see infobox on “Emissions trading and offsets”). Moreover, controversial technology-based solutions such as geoengineering and carbon capture and storage are to ‘neutralise’ unavoidable emissions. The green economy is backed by a powerful alliance of organisations such as the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development), the UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme), the World Bank, some of the major environmental organisations, green parties and several corporations and banks. By taking on the role of ‘green pioneers’, these firms hope to increase their competitive opportunities.

However, it is unlikely that such a green economy can actually be realised. The necessary increases in efficiency go far beyond our capabilities and we are unlikely to witness such rapid technological progress.¹⁶ The presumed dematerialisation, i.e. the focus on a purportedly emissions-free services sector, ignores the sector’s dependency on a physical infrastructure and energy requirements.¹⁷ In any case, these efficiency gains would — according to the dominant (neoclassical) economic theory — not only reduce emissions, but also, due to lower product prices, increase consumption (see *rebound effect* in the GLOSSARY).¹⁸

are merely treating the symptom rather than the cause.¹⁵ Still, these strategies ensure the veil is not lifted and that we feel safe. After all, something is being done.

The contradictions between an increasing awareness that there is an issue on the one hand, and the growing problems on the other are obvious. Vaguely, we feel that climate change could pose a serious threat and that the unfair production conditions in agriculture and the textile and electronics industry are untenable, i.e. that something is not okay with our current mode of production. However, this does not lead to new progressive policies or attempts to cut down on or fundamentally change our living standards.

Even more problematic is the success of simplistic yet false narratives and projects from the right wing, and with them the rise of right-wing populist forces. One explanation is that many people are aware of the problems we face and feel a certain degree of uncertainty. As part of their nationalist rhetoric, right-wing populists use the crisis to promote isolationism and secure the imperial mode of living for their own nation. The mainstream parties are also reacting to this social climate with increasingly isolationist tendencies. While

i Since its market launch, 111,000 Fairphones have been sold, a figure dwarfed by the 219 million iPhones Apple managed to sell in 2016 alone (DIGITALISATION).

the established parties, unions, and industry associations speak of change and sustainability, their policies are characterised by a continuity that cements and escalates current socio-ecological problems.¹⁹ This fact is reflected, for example, in the austerity measures the EU imposed on Greece (see the chapter on MONEY AND FINANCE).

Deeper and more inclusive projects of transformation that aim for a more socially just and ecological transformation have so far not been able to win people over to the same degree. One reason is that they often use complex and esoteric language. Moreover, they are often vague and, at the same time, far more complex than the simple solutions offered by the right. People are therefore uncertain as to how a socio-ecological transformation would change their everyday lives. It also does not seem to be clear how a transformation of production structures and modes of living could work in practice at the local, regional, and global levels.

This publication aims to offer a more detailed analysis of why hardly anything is changing as well as explore which stakeholders and structures in specific parts of our everyday lives are standing in the way of a transformation towards a society based on solidarity. Finding answers to this question is a necessary and first step to overcoming injustices. We shall then subsequently show how a socio-ecological transformation could be driven forward.

Our approach: an overview of At the Expense of Others

The following chapter provides a **historical overview** of how the current situation developed. We show how imperial modes of living came into being throughout the course of various economic and social developments that took place between the 16th century and today, and how they were able to spread and take hold. Based on six thematic fields, we then analyse how imperial modes of living permeate different spheres of our everyday lives and pinpoint the ways in which human labour and the environment are exploited in these areas. Moreover, we reveal the stakeholders and conditions that stabilise them.

Nearly all of us own a smartphone and actively participate in the digital world. The third chapter on **digitalisation** focuses on how resources from conflict regions and neocolonial economic relations allow us to buy and use smartphones, how our lives are becoming increasingly digitalised and what consequences this has for our social fabric and our economy. Our lives are based on and reproduced by the **care work** provided by the people who take care of others. At whose expense the current organisation of care in our societies comes and the stakeholders that help maintain this system are the focus of chapter four. To maintain our daily lives, we need money. How this and the other apparent norms of our **money and finance economy** connect us with global injustices, indebtedness and exploitation is the theme of chapter five. We have all enjoyed certain levels of **education** and acquired knowledge. The sixth chapter analyses how our education inculcates the imperial modes of living within us, represses other

forms of knowledge and how Western knowledge production leads to the exploitation of nature and other epistemologies. The food we eat also severely impacts people and ecosystems elsewhere. Chapter seven highlights the links that exist between the **food** we eat and global hunger, climate-damaging agriculture and the market power of food corporations. A further important precondition for imperial modes of production and living is our **mobility**—whether it's the miles we travel for our holidays or those covered by the T-shirts in our wardrobes. The impacts and contradictions of the accelerated, oil-based transport system is the focus of chapter eight.

These spheres of our everyday lives are select examples that represent key realities for a large share of the global upper and middle classes. They allow us to vividly show how the imperial modes of living are at work in our everyday activities. Moreover, our analysis reveals why nothing is changing and we ask which concrete concepts, policies, and infrastructures strengthen and stabilise the current system. Chapter nine provides an overview of the results of the preceding analysis and reveals points of leverage and strategies to overcome the imperial mode of living. Whereas alternatives to our imperial modes of living will require large-scale shifts in the modes of production and our everyday lives, they do not necessarily imply a loss of quality of life. On the contrary: community-based and cooperative forms of living, working, caring, doing business and living together are possible and already exist. We could expand them, create networks and turn them from an exception into the rule.

Endnotes

- 1 UNDP, 2016
- 2 Credit Suisse, 2017; Forbes, 2017
- 3 Brand & Wissen, 2017
- 4 Pimm et al., 2014
- 5 Kim, Sexton & Townshend, 2015
- 6 International Organization for Migration, 2009
- 7 Bauriedl, 2014; IPCC, 2014
- 8 Brand & Wissen, 2017
- 9 Brand & Wissen, 2017
- 10 Svampa, 2012
- 11 Wuppertal Institut, 2005
- 12 Fairtrade Deutschland, 2016
- 13 Atmosfair, 2017
- 14 Fairphone, 2017
- 15 Ziai, 2004
- 16 Karathanassis, 2014
- 17 Wölfl, 2003
- 18 Jackson, 2011; Santarius, 2012
- 19 Fraser, 2017

A short history of the imperial mode of living

Where did the imperial mode of living originate and how did it develop? This chapter provides a historical overview from a European perspective, revealing a history that is as much characterised by inventiveness, material expansion and emancipation as by repression, exploitation and violence.

The imperial mode of living, i.e. the essentially unlimited access to labour and resources on a global scale, developed over the course of the last 500 years. At first a luxury afforded only to the European and North American elites, it eventually became the norm for the middle and upper classes. Initially, global political and economic relations of power were manifested in explicitly despotic forms of rule (colonialism and imperialism). But eventually these were replaced by more subtle forms of exploitation (dependency on and mediation by the global market).¹ Today, the imperial mode of living is supported by a broad social consensus and often appears quasi natural. This system maintains dependencies and social constraints and thereby effectively blocks the road to a socio-ecological society.

Colonialism: the early stages of the imperial mode of living

Following the transition from the Middle Ages to modernity, European expansion took hold in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. Different factors encouraged this development. Economic power had grown in the late Middle Ages, and banks and large trading companies had developed. Reformation provided a further boost to the economy, as many highly qualified individuals were no longer bound to the church and could take up secular occupations. This promoted administrative, technological and scientific innovation. Christian missionary zeal provided European expansionism with its readiness for violence and bloodshed. In particular, the kingdoms of Spain and Portugal, where the drive to “subjugate the world”² originated, had long been warring with Muslims and Jews. Reformation then created a schism within Christianity and led to a series of religious wars. In the course of these and other military conflicts, many of the smaller kingdoms were subjugated and absorbed into larger dominions. Increasingly, absolutist regimes began to appear in Europe that depended

on large sums of money to maintain their expensive symbols of power and finance numerous wars. The combination of technological innovation in the fields of sea travel and weaponry, the need for money, a culture of violence and a missionary zeal created an explosive mixture that was about to be unleashed on the rest of the world.

Europe expands ...

Portugal and Spain were the first to go forth in search of new roads to the riches and markets of the East, thereby venturing into uncharted territories, particularly the ‘New World’. Other European nations, among them the Netherlands and England, soon followed suit. In these faraway places, the political situation often favoured European expansion: power vacuums in certain regions provided opportunities that European powers could exploit. This was also the case in South-East Asia, where China, the dominant power, had only recently cut its external ties and disbanded its huge fleet.³ Europeans were also often able to take advantage of local and/or transregional conflicts. In other parts of the world, such as in the Americas, one of the main reasons they were able to quickly assert their dominance was because of the diseases they brought, such as influenza, which soon decimated the indigenous populations. Most importantly, however, was the fact that European invaders had more advanced military technology, particularly in terms of firearms (cannons being just one example) that enabled them to brutally rise to the top in many, yet by no means all, regions of the world (the powerful Ottoman Empire remained a feared opponent until well into the 17th century). European powers also posed no serious threat to the Chinese empire or the Indian Mughal emperors.⁴ Technologically, scientifically and economically, Europeans lagged behind in many areas.¹ A key factor of European expansionism was its reliance on violence and the ruthless exploitation of humans and the natural world.⁵ Indigenous peoples — in particular, from Africa — were forced into labour and enslaved, worked under catastrophic conditions and perished by the thousands. The colonial masters met resistance with brutal force and exterminated numerous tribes and ethnic groups. As late as the early 20th century, German troops committed genocide against swathes of the Herero and Nama in German South West Africa.

»»
Following the transition from the Middle Ages to modernity, European expansion took hold in the late 15th and early 16th centuries.«

i Up to the 18th century, the British textile industry continued to copy the Indian model and Europeans only managed to make porcelain around 900 years after China. Before that, during the Middle Ages, Europeans used techniques to produce silk, paper and gunpowder that they had learnt from the ‘Middle Kingdom’.

State and private actors collaborated closely to force the world into submission. The monarchic or oligarchic governments of colonial states created incentives, provided the framework conditions, and gave legitimacy to treaties or action to protect their ‘enterprises’, using military force where necessary. In exchange they received important revenue, e.g. through taxes. Private and semi-private actors, such as businesses, governors and stock companies — the British East India Company is one famous example — in turn financed colonialism and were often in charge of the ‘dirty work’. They (and their shareholders) received a large share of the profits gained through exploitation. States granted their large national trading companies monopolies, and empowered them to wage war and execute “punitive measures”.⁶ Soon shares and bonds were financing this expansion. We practically owe our modern system of stock exchanges and central banks (see MONEY AND FINANCE) to this structure created to finance exploitation,⁷ which has also been described as “war capitalism”⁸

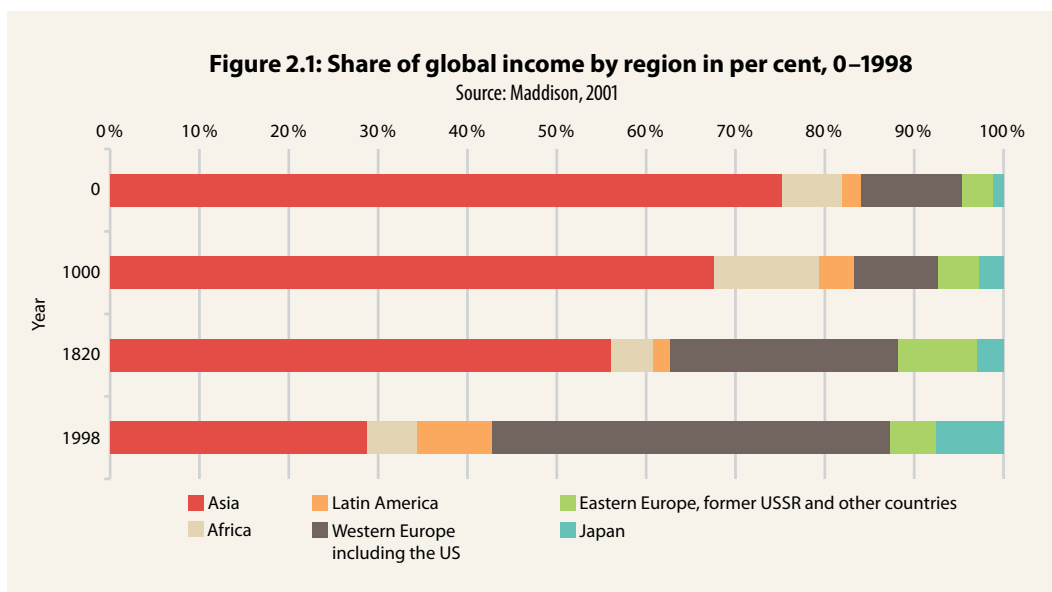
... and gives birth to the first global market

With their heavily armed ships, European traders “shoved competitors off the field and [...] quite literally hunted for workers”⁹ They took over existing international trade routes and created new ones. A gigantic trade system dominated by European powers and maintained by armed force developed. The first global market came into being and it was shaped by a European elite hell-bent on preserving their interests. On one occasion, the Dutch East India Company murdered an estimated 15,000 people — nearly the entire population of one island group — in order to gain control of the profitable nutmeg trade¹⁰ before establishing a slave-based plantation economy. To secure an exploitive system that benefited a small elite, Europeans established such ‘extractive institutions’ everywhere in their colonies. In many countries of the Global South, the legacy of these institutions continues to have a destructive effect on economies and political systems. For

the colonial masters, however, this not only provided a means to stabilise and expand their hegemony, it also increased their profits from trade and exploitation, and hence their access to ever more goods from all over the world. The global market thus became the backbone of the imperial mode of living during this early phase. In exchange for the silver they had robbed from the colonies and the ‘profits’ reaped from the slave trade, European elites were able to buy sought-after goods in Asia (predominantly China and India), such as tea, metals, precious stones, porcelain, silk and cotton fabrics. And America provided them with tobacco, sugar and other goods.¹¹ Tellingly, while sugar production was concentrated in Brazil and the Caribbean, the commodity itself was almost exclusively consumed by people in Europe and North America. Sugar was cheap enough that it was even affordable to the lower classes, for whom such luxury goods were entirely out of reach and who were often no better off than the indigenous peoples in the colonies. Until well into the 20th century, the access to goods from around the world was a privilege that remained unattainable for large parts of the European population.

Colonial knowledge shapes the world

Legitimised not least by blatant racism, violent exploitation provided the imperial mode of living’s intellectual basis. ‘Wild’ indigenous peoples were allegedly more animal than man, and could therefore be treated and exploited as such.¹² From the Middle Ages came the deep conviction that non-Christian religions had to be opposed. Europeans interpreted their great success in subjugating, massacring and pillaging other peoples as a heavenly blessing. It also led the colonial powers and elites to invest in the technologies and sciences that their increasing wealth, success and capacity to exploit the world relied on.¹³ The colonial ‘success story’ and imperial mode of living are therefore deeply inscribed in the practice and theory of Western science and continue to inform our understanding of sensible



ii Such as engineering, earth science, land surveying, shipbuilding and nautical science, as well as, in particular, weapons and military technology or the considerable collection and organisation of encyclopaedic knowledge on the different parts of the world.

and rational ways of dealing with the world. For subjugated and exploited peoples, the strength and wealth of their foreign masters were often seen as proof of the 'objective correctness' of their worldview and methods. Thus success could only be brought about using the same approach. This devalued non-European cultures and their knowledge—to the benefit of Western concepts (see EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE).

Industrialisation and imperialism

Europe's global dominance only developed in the wake of a second wave of colonial expansion in the 18th and 19th centuries, and in the 20th century, this then led to the division of the world into 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' nations.¹³ For centuries, it was non-European countries such as China, India and a few others (today referred to as 'developing nations') that held the largest share of global income (Figure 2.1).¹⁴ This, however, changed quickly. Competing European colonial powers expanded their grip on global resources—land (see FOOD AND AGRICULTURE), labour (forced servitude or slavery) and raw materials—and violently divided up the world between them. This era, when Europe subjugated and suppressed most of the world, has become known as the Age of Imperialism. Imperialism fundamentally altered international relations and its effects continue to be felt in many aspects of life today. Whereas the countries of the Global South still controlled around 63 per cent of global income at the beginning of the 19th century, this share had dropped to a mere 27 per cent by the middle of the 20th century.¹⁵

Industrialisation and its colonial dimension

Agriculture had long been the dominant sector, yet over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, industry, business, trade and transport gradually took over. These sectors now drove economic growth and the development of society.¹⁶ Increasingly, mechanisation and the steam engine's rhythmic hissing drove production and ensured the growing productivity of the emerging factories. Mechanical looms, for example, meant cloth could be produced faster than ever before, while steamships and railways could transport people and goods at unprecedented speed. New technologies and fossil fuels—predominantly coal at first—liberated production from natural constraints. Production could take place where there were large pools of workers. This was the beginning of the fossil era.¹⁷

All too often the West interprets these developments as the logical consequence of superior Western inventiveness and entrepreneurial spirit. However, such a perspective overlooks the fact that European industrialisation was by no means solely the result of technological innovation. Globally, it was the work of millions of slaves, forced labourers, and *coolies* (day labourers) who helped bring about the economic rise of the imperial powers. They also provided the cheap raw materials for Western industries.¹⁸ The official abolition of slavery did little to change this.ⁱⁱⁱ In many cases, European technology was based on the knowledge that

Europeans appropriated from other peoples. The British textile industry—the ultimate symbol of industrial capitalism—spied on the then leading Indian textile producers and copied many of their techniques and patterns¹⁹. Whereas the key goods during the initial phases of colonialism were silver, sugar, tea and spices (see above), industrialisation created a growing demand for cotton (for the textile industry), rubber (for wheels and car tires) as well as iron ore, nickel and other metals (e.g. to produce steel), particularly over the course of the 19th century.²⁰

Europe's new class society

Industrial capitalism led to a social order fundamentally characterised by salaried labour and new social inequalities. A small and ever wealthier bourgeoisie that owned capital and the means of production, such as factories, was faced by a rapidly growing number of salary-dependent workers who had little more than their own labour.²¹ Men, women and children worked under the harshest conditions in factories—often between 12 and 16 hours per day, without healthcare or pensions—all for a pittance. Hard physical labour was the harsh reality for Europe's lower classes, much like for the people in the colonies. Often, people were left with no other choice than to work in the factories. In the United Kingdom, the nobility drove large parts of the rural population from common land to use it for the more profitable production of wool.²² As a result, many living in rural areas could no longer feed their families and so moved to the cities to earn at least a meagre salary in the expanding factories. For women, this led to a double burden. Not only did they work in textile factories, or in private households, for a salary that was significantly lower than that of their male colleagues, but they still had to perform household chores, which were considered the natural domain of women, i.e. it was work that was neither remunerated nor valued (see CARE).²³

The early stages of the growth society

From the 18th century onwards, the population and the economy both grew rapidly, with one factor driving the other. Between 1700 and 1800 alone, the European population nearly doubled.²⁴ This development contributed to the spread of the imperial mode of living not least due to the important migratory wave it caused. Seeking economic success, or simply fleeing repression, millions of people migrated from Europe to other parts of the world and spread Western forms of thinking and Western economic habits. Population growth in Europe also provided industrialists with a huge pool of labourers in search of work. It also drastically increased the pressure to improve the infrastructure and provide affordable food, which promoted innovation in agriculture. The improvement or introduction of novel forms of cultivation, fertilisers and agricultural crops (such as maize, potatoes and pumpkins from North and South America) helped stimulate further population growth and boost agricultural

iii The same applies to the 4th Industrial Revolution (see DIGITALISATION).

productivity. Towards the end of the 18th century, a revolution in transport also took place. The construction of transportation canals boomed—first in the UK, and later in continental Europe and the US. An increasing number of goods from regional and global trade were transported on inland waterways, providing links between the new urban centres. During the second half of the 19th century, railways revolutionised the transport of people and goods as they freed transport from its dependence on river courses.²⁵ Both from an economic and military point of view, this was highly important, and so states overwhelmingly supported the development of this new infrastructure, even going so far as to implement measures against local resistance. More often than not, the necessary capital for these investments stemmed from the exploitation of the colonies. Towards the end of the 19th century, railway construction had become the largest economic sector in Europe and North America—and therefore a driver of industrialisation in two ways: whilst it created brand new means of communication, logistics and transport, it was also a booming economic sector in its own right. The price for the industrial age was paid for dearly by large segments of the population and ecosystems, as this new-found productivity and mobility relied heavily on large-scale exploitation and fossil energy—at first, coal and then mainly oil in the 20th century.

Fordism: Wealth for everybody?

During the early stages of industrialisation, it was almost exclusively members of the elite, such as factory owners, who profited. However, over time unions won higher salaries and shorter working days for labourers in fierce struggles. The emerging welfare state also significantly owes its existence to the strength of the organised interests of the wage-earning population. At the same time, technological innovation and improved workflows (such as assembly line work) increased productivity, leading to lower unit costs and therefore also lower prices.²⁶ For many companies, state market regu-

lation was acceptable as long as it still facilitated higher profits. Furthermore, towards the end of the 19th century, the new advertising industry promoted a culture of consumption that over the course of the 20th century took hold among most of the population.²⁷

A salient feature of this new consumer society was that it was no longer merely the economic, political and religious elites, but rather the “majority of the population that had access to these new forms of consumption”.²⁸ Large swathes of the working class in the Global North enjoyed an imperial mode of living and gained a share in the new wealth which continued to rely on the global appropriation and exploitation of labour and resources. Take cars, for example. At the end of the 19th century, they were an exclusive means of transport reserved only for the upper classes; by the 20th century, they had become a mass product. This period of mass production and mass consumption is called Fordism, a name derived from the car manufacturer Henry Ford.^{iv} As this period also saw workers become consumers too, some speak of the “emancipation of the proletariat”,²⁹ whereby relatively poorer individuals were able to accept the imperial mode of living in spite of the inequalities that persisted.

The downside of new wealth

However, the fruits of these developments were reserved mainly for the white population. Particularly in the US, the ‘new top dog’ of the global economy, the struggle for equal rights became a defining factor in the everyday lives of black people. Moreover, traditional gender roles initially remained almost fixed. Care remained the domain of women and was not recognised as real work. Often, the social market economy is seen in a positive light; however, it could only function—and this fact often goes unmentioned—“at the expense of women’s independence and their opportunities for progress”.³⁰ Until 1977, married women in Germany were barred from signing an employment contract without first obtaining permission from their husbands. In many cases, activists had to fight for

Figure 2.2: Timeline



iv Allegedly, his workers were able to afford one of his cars after only a few months of work.

women to be granted the right to vote, study at university or even run a marathon.

Even though Fordism helped generalise the imperial mode of living to a certain degree, by and large this trend remained restricted to the former colonial powers (the USA, the UK, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Belgium and Japan). Following World War II, many societies of the Global South were occupied by their battle to gain independence from these countries (in particular, from France and the UK). These struggles against persisting injustices went more or less unnoticed by broad segments of the German population during the postwar period — Germans were fixated by the idea of growth-based wealth for all.

Growth as the central goal of economic policy

In the 1950s and 1960s, Germany experienced what came to be known as the “elevator effect”³¹. Overall, inequality did not decrease, but economic growth led to a situation where people of all social classes gained increasing material wealth — as a whole, society was *elevated* to the next level.³² Extreme mass poverty, which characterised the early phases of industrialisation, was almost entirely eradicated. For this reason, economic growth remains the highest economic policy goal in Germany and most other societies and is still a widely accepted objective; it created new demand and led to a belief in the need for permanent growth.³³ In some of the earliest nations to become industrialised, the imperial mode of living became a mass phenomenon: nearly everybody gained the purchasing power to buy goods and services and thereby, mediated by businesses and global markets, acquired access to the labour and ecosystems of the countries of the Global South. Following independence, neocolonial trade regimes often developed on the global markets, reducing the countries of the Global South mainly to providers of resources, food and labour for the Global North.³⁴ Most of the former colonies developed industrialisation strategies to achieve similar levels of wealth as the countries of the Global North. Yet the rules of the global economy

were still being written by the former colonisers. Since the 1960s, the difference in the degree of industrialisation^v between countries of the Global North and South has effectively decreased. However, large discrepancies between these countries persist in terms of income.³⁵ It was only as the dominance of Fordism began to wane in the 1970s that the “limits to growth”³⁶ entered public debate. The consequences of highly resource- and emissions-intensive mass consumption and mass production became too evident. Mobility continued to rely heavily on oil, in particular, but also coal. Moreover, an increasing number of products were being made from plastic. Cement, steel, sand and gravel were also needed for the rapidly developing road infrastructure, which, compared to railways, required nearly ten times as much area. Under Fordism, the transport sector therefore became the greatest energy consumer, ranking even ahead of industry.³⁷

The means for growth, for example, the industrialisation of agriculture, relied on monocultures, an excessive use of pesticides and chemical fertilisers that destroyed soil fertility and biodiversity. These new methods often also led to rural exodus, impoverishment and, increasingly, the destruction of non-industrial, regional and ecological forms of farming (see **FOOD AND AGRICULTURE**).³⁸ Following the 1960s and 1970s, this led to the spread of new social movements that searched for alternative forms of consumption and production that did not burden people and the environment. However, these ideas never took hold on a global scale.

Neoliberal globalisation

The 1980s wave of globalisation (see **GLOSSARY**) made it possible for the broad mass of the world’s middle and upper classes — even beyond the former colonial powers — to enjoy the imperial mode of living. Most everyday commodities, such as sports shoes, computers or supermarket food items, were now no longer standard products produced by a single business, but derived from a complex network of supply and production that spread across diverse locations throughout the



v Regarding the manufacturing industry’s share of GDP.

world. Not only was this change linked to a process of relative deindustrialisation in the Global North, and China's rise to become the 'workbench of the world', it was also accompanied by global markets dominated by a handful of transnational corporations and the widespread acceptance of a new economic policy ideology: neoliberalism (see GLOSSARY).

Influential politicians such as US President Ronald Reagan or British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher became the symbols of a political and economic doctrine that placed the freedom and efficiency of markets at the heart of every political agenda and also largely dominated academic thinking (particularly in terms of economics) and civil society (see EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE).³⁹ Even social democratic parties, who had previously appeared to defend the interests of the wage-earning population, followed the new trend: privatisation, deregulation and scaling back the state's responsibilities (especially regarding welfare provision) were now seen as the medicine to all economic ailments. Instead of promoting democratic control over markets, which had, to a certain degree, characterised the Fordist era, neoliberal theorists advocated the 'market-conforming democracy'. Following the breakup of the Soviet Union and Real Socialism, this concept made its breakthrough in the 1990s.⁴⁰

'Development' – but for whom?

Convinced of the market's self-regulating capacities, influential providers of financial assistance, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank or the G8 (Group of Eight), implemented so-called structural adjustment programmes as a form of 'development aid' during the 1980s and 90s.⁴¹ They aimed to open up economies for the private economic benefit of transnational corporations, promote an export-oriented agriculture (see FOOD AND AGRICULTURE) and decrease the state's involvement in spheres such as healthcare and education (see CARE). Moreover, since the 1990s, to institutionally anchor this trend and grant private investors enforceable rights, numerous international free trade agreements have been concluded.^{vi} For the countries of the Global South, many of which had only very recently freed themselves of the colonial yoke, neoliberal policies led to new dependencies — on international donors in the form of huge unpayable debts (see MONEY AND FINANCE), and also on the fluctuations of global markets. In many cases, this crippled entire sectors of local economies.⁴² Many people, in particular those from rural areas, were forced to leave their homes and seek new prospects for themselves and their families — taking on precarious jobs as migrant labourers on the fields, as well as in the factories or the households of the globalised world (see FOOD AND AGRICULTURE, DIGITALISATION and CARE).

Over the past 30 years, this 'globalisation from above'⁴³ has exacerbated global income and wealth inequalities, which are today greater than at any time since

World War II. Since the 1990s, inequality has particularly increased within most countries, as much in the Global South as in the Global North.⁴⁴ Overall, the global economy has grown, mainly due to the emerging middle and upper classes in countries such as China, India and Brazil who emulate the imperial mode of living of the Global North. Growth, however, does not necessarily lead to wealth, especially not for everybody. Instead of benefiting the entire global population, as the dominant economic theory predicted, globalisation has increased the power of elites and impoverished and wrought precarious conditions (see GLOSSARY) on large swathes of the population in many countries of the world.⁴⁵ Today, the richest one per cent of the global population owns nearly half of the total global wealth.⁴⁶

The (daily) rule of the market

These increasing inequalities are attributable not least to the rise of financial markets. Neoliberal globalisation policies not only 'unleashed' global trade, but also led to business models where more and more corporations generally take decisions based on how they will affect a company's share price, and are increasingly involved in financial markets themselves.⁴⁷ For the wealthy, investments in the real economy, and thus jobs and salaries, are mostly less profitable and less attractive, creating an incentive to invest in innovative financial products (see MONEY AND FINANCE). Since the crisis of Fordism and the breakup of the system of fixed exchange rates at the beginning of the 1970s (the so-called *Nixon Shock*), finance has morphed from a 'servant' of industrial production to the sector calling all the shots on the global economy.⁴⁸

Since then, the logics of (financial) markets have come to dominate more and more aspects of our lives. Having access to labour and resources, which is the basis of the imperial mode of living, this shift has, in particular, increased the depth of this logic's penetration and its versatility. Whether it is education, family life, leisure time or our relationship with nature, nearly all spheres of our lives are today based on a logic of profit and organised through markets.⁴⁹ Critical voices therefore speak of a 'market civilisation'.⁵⁰ Hundreds of thousands of young people today leave university shouldering a debt that they will need years to repay (see MONEY AND FINANCE). Pension funds turn into institutional investors that speculate on food (see FOOD AND AGRICULTURE) and we are made to believe that CO₂ emissions have a monetary value that we can simply 'pay off' each time we fly (see MOBILITY). It is almost impossible to elude the grip of the market. Money has even seeped into the most fundamental areas of life, such as providing care for our loved ones (see CARE).

» Over the past 30 years, this globalisation from above has exacerbated global income and wealth inequalities, which are today greater than at any time since World War II.«

vi In 1991, for example, the establishment of Mercosur created a Latin American internal market, followed by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 and in 1995 the World Trade Organisation (WTO) was established as the global political free trade institution.

History is made by us

Already this short overview of the history of the imperial mode of living highlights how closely-knit exploitation and innovation, growth and inequality, wealth and violence are—even today. This historical overview not only provides important background information for the analysis of individual elements that now follows, it is also key to developing a perspective for a future worth living for all mankind. Even the wealth that has been accumulated in the past endangers any truly sustainable society due to the large amounts of resources required to make it happen. Globally, industrial mass

production is expanding and could grow even further in the not too distant future thanks to industry 4.0 (see DIGITALISATION). But in spite of these gloomy predictions, a transition to a different, social and ecological global society is nonetheless possible. The historical injustices described here were always unacceptable, and people have consistently fought to improve their lives, achieving enormous progress and leaving their mark on global history (the abolition of slavery being just one example). Ultimately, history is the outcome of human acts, struggles and discussions. History is made. By us.

Endnotes

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Today it feels like everybody is talking about the problems and crises of our times: the climate and resource crisis, Greece's permanent socio-political crisis or the degrading exploitative practices of the textile industry. Many are aware of the issues, yet little seems to change. Why is this? The concept of the imperial mode of living explains why, in spite of increasing injustices, no long-term alternatives have managed to succeed and a socio-ecological transformation remains out of sight.

This text introduces the concept of an imperial mode of living and explains how our current mode of production and living is putting both people and the natural world under strain. We shine a spotlight on various areas of our daily lives, including food, mobility and digitalisation. We also look at socio-ecological alternatives and approaches to establish a good life for everyone – not just a few.

The non-profit association **Common Future e.V.** from Göttingen is active in a number of projects focussing on global justice and socio-ecological business approaches. From April 2016 to May 2017, the association organised the I.L.A. Werkstatt (Imperiale Lebensweisen – Ausbeutungsstrukturen im 21. Jahrhundert/ Imperial Modes of Living – Structures of Exploitation in the 21st Century). Out of this was born the interdisciplinary I.L.A. Kollektiv, consisting of 17 young researchers and activists. Their goal: dedicating a whole year to the scientific study of the imperial mode of living and bringing their results to a wider audience.



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