

Book Review

Appel, Hannah. *The Licit Life of Capitalism: US Oil in Equatorial Guinea*. Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2019, 332 pages.

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In the last pages of her brilliant account of oil extraction in Equatorial Guinea, Hannah Appel reminds us that “many of capitalism’s most egregious excesses are lawful” (280). This quote defines the core premise of *The Licit Life of Capitalism*, the result of 14 months of fieldwork between 2007 and 2008. In the purest tradition of contemporary economic anthropology, Appel investigates the excesses of capitalism, exploring the introduction of a neo-liberal post-colony, with all its structures and constitutive patterns of racism, patriarchy, and dispossession, and the violence of the licit capitalist system of oil extraction. The book demonstrates the process of disentanglement between the Equatoguinean reality and an offshore industry reliant on global inequalities.

Appel describes her work as a “political history of the conditions of possibility” (5) of the current form of oil extraction in the small, insular state. The book begins with the same colonial conflation of public office with private gains, found later in post-colonial Equatorial Guinea. From Spanish colonial authorities to Macías and Nguema, Malabo’s rulers established parts of the possibilities for transnational oil companies in their daily practices in the country. Appel traces the belief that Equatorial Guinea is disconnected from some of the world’s largest corporations to the use of technological, legal, and discursive strategies. While this disentanglement appears successful at first glance, she demonstrates how these processes failed to account for the industry’s deep entanglement with the historical phenomena of colonial domination. This book is inscribed in feminist approaches to capitalism and the Black radical tradition of scholarship. It forcefully embraces critical theory to provide a globally applicable argument about capitalist extraction and its constitutive excesses against emancipation.

Chapter 1 highlights the similarities between oil extraction and offshore financial placements through an ethnographic account of an offshore platform operating off the coast of Equatorial Guinea. These platforms rely on the idea of frictionless operations, operations that are smoothed by the disentanglement with the realities of a corrupt regime and unstable service provision. The permissiveness of the offshore, favoured by its distancing from Equatoguineans' lives, is part of what Stoler termed "imperial debris" and reflects corporate concerns about physical and reputational risks. The hidden conditions of operations in the open oceans, the specific infrastructure, and new "technosocial" (59) organization allow for the continuity of colonial subjugation and their translation in racialized wages, distinct living conditions and responsibilities. Appel frames the capitalist dream of a frictionless world, with oil streaming from offshore rigs to tankers with little to no terrestrial existence, in a reality of profound onshore political and social impacts. Her analysis translates the pervasive logic of white supremacy in labour practices and throughout the corporate structure of the offshore oil and gas industry, from the physicality of its extraction.

In her second chapter, Appel turns to expats' living conditions. Her account of the racial segregation, patriarchal, heteronormative structure, and religious morality prevailing in the compounds exposes the reproduction of a Texan puritan social life of the 1950s. These enclaves operate in a similar offshore perspective to the extraction of the oil itself. They are framed as disentangled from the Equatoguinean life while replicating inequalities at the core of market efficiencies. Through unique access, provided in part by her "own whiteness and [...] young womanhood" (88), Appel details the performative separation between the company and the 'outside,' whites and non-whites, and Western citizens and non-Western citizens. The description of segregated housing depending on one's position in the company, which aligns with racial considerations, reminds us of South-African apartheid or the US Jim Crow era. The villas of British and American managers, in stark opposition to the barracks of Filipino, Indian, and Pakistani workers, and a shift system ingraining colonial inequalities, are all strategies of market efficiency and profit generation.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Appel adopts a legal anthropology approach to address the role that contracting and subcontracting practices play to perpetuate colonial subjugation. She brings to light the profound inequalities that capitalistic extraction, through licit practices, imposes on individuals and countries. As "legal enclaves" (139), contracts play a critical role in ensuring the separation,

at least at first glance, between the company and its extractive site. In her ethnography of high-level management, Hannah Appel frames these legal instruments as tools for organizing social inequalities to support economic means. The performative separation between the company and the on-the-ground realities that contractual clauses codify is described as the formation of liberal violent licitness. This codification answers concerns around corruption and the absence of the rule of law, as defined by liberal conceptions of transparency. She builds on Mbembe's explanation that liberal institutions define states of the Global South through a lack of local governance, the rule of law, and transparency (2001).

Appel identifies this as the source of bureaucratic micropractices that render licit otherwise questionable practices. At the contracting level, between the state and operating companies, production-sharing contracts and their stability clauses provide replicable and standardized tools used in unequal spaces of extraction worldwide. From the logic of unpredictability and instability, these documents result from companies' awareness of the diversity of socio-economic contexts in which their operations take place and which they sustain. In particular, the subcontracting system depicted by Appel in the fourth chapter of her book translates the racialization of skills and the exclusion of Equatoguinean workers supported by the industry. American oil companies reproduce colonial labour relations by relying on Filipino workforce, historically employed by the US Navy. They move workers like chess pieces across their operations worldwide. The deeply rooted injustices at the center of this system are morally justified by efficiencies of the market, hiding the fact that these hierarchies are constitutive of capitalist extraction. Appel supports that the subcontracting tradition of the industry is the legalizing tool for these inequalities. From international to local body shops (companies providing a workforce for the oil and gas industry), pays, holidays, shifts, positions, and benefits depend on race.

In her final two chapters, Appel goes back to more traditional questions around the state, the "resource curse," and transparency remedies to neoliberal excesses. What does the existence of the national economy narrative entail for the licitness of practices of offshore oil extraction in Equatorial Guinea? Once again, the efforts put on standardization, one of the constitutive elements of the national economy, allow for the reproduction and seriality of deeply colonial practices vested with a market justification. In a world shaped by the fluidity of money transactions and the culture of auditing, the use of standardized indicators and records created the notion of national economy in Equatorial Guinea.

In other words, the national economy provides the means and justifications of the highly unequal and colonial practices of the oil industry. Appel's experience during the 2007 National Economic Conference and the Orange concert in central Malabo illustrates the utopia of an efficient private sector and the fantasies that a capitalistic economy instigates in people. However, these performative events are the products of an entanglement with the state and its constitutive features rejected by the liberal mantra against corruption and for the rule of law.

This fight for "transparency-as-solution" (249), epitomized by the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative's (EITI) mission in Equatorial Guinea, is the topic of the last chapter of the book. Fulfilled by and for a capitalistic ethos of market efficiency and the perception that disentanglement is the only solution, transparency policies and initiatives conflate global standards and national specificities. Appel provides a remarkable description of the inclusion (according to government officials) or lack of inclusion (according to the EITI and its supportive watchdogs) of an undefined group called "civil society" in the decisional instances of the transparency process. As with the creation of the national economy by and for the industry, the civil society does not pre-exist the EITI but is constituted by it. A creation that, in Equatorial Guinea, the state transferred to the industry.

Hannah Appel links legal and economic ethnographies to explain a specific political and social situation that reproduces itself worldwide. She highlights processes that are not simple by-products of capitalism but the roots and architecture of the extractive markets we live in. This study closes on a call for action as she argues that we should "always commit ourselves to push those limits [of radical critiques outside academia] by putting ourselves beyond the page as well" (283).

References

- Stoler, Ann Laura. 2013. *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Mbembe, Achille. 2001. *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: University of California Press.