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The Special Section “Imperial Mode of Living” – a short introduction

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In 2017, the book “Imperiale Lebensweise. Zur Ausbeutung von Mensch und Natur im Globalen Kapitalismus” by the two political scientists *Ulrich Brand* and *Markus Wissen* was published. In addition to translations into Spanish and Portuguese, a translation into English has now been available since 2021 under the slightly modified title “The Imperial Mode of Living. Everyday Life and the Ecological Crisis of Capitalism”.

Described by some as a true “tour de force” (*Watts*), the two authors are concerned with nothing less than a “grand narrative” from the perspective of a critique of capitalism on the emergence, perpetuation, and hegemony of a societal relation with nature in which excessive consumption of resources, exploitation of labor and land, and social inequality have become determinants of everyday practice. This is dominantly true for the countries of the Global North, but increasingly also for the so-called emerging countries and among the elites of the countries of the Global South. In this context, the dimension of an “Elsewhere” is constitutive for the Imperial Mode of Living, at the expense of which it functions – through resource transfers for its (re)production on the one hand (for example, cheap labor, cheap food, cheap raw materials), through externalization of its costs (especially its environmental costs) on the other. Thus, the concept of the Imperial Mode of Living becomes an important interpretive approach to the emergence and interconnectedness as well as to the functional logics of the multiple crises that define our world and that we have to cope with. Ultimately, the authors’ approach

is about understanding and uncovering why social change in terms of socio-ecological transformation is so difficult and what “systemic” blockages stand in its way.

The approach of the Imperial Mode of Living is explicitly multi-scalar. It is about global-local linkages and interdependencies, it is about North-South relations under the auspices of global capitalism, and it is above all about the “inside” and “outside” on which the Imperial Mode of Living is based and which it reproduces at different levels of scale. Thus, it is also centrally about the consequences of the Imperial Mode of Living for the production and appropriation of space – both conceptually and in many places concretely “experienceable”.

The Imperial Mode of Living thus becomes a concept that challenges geography, regional studies, and anyone pursuing a spatial perspective. Against this background, the editors of ERDE were pleased to take up the initiative of *Ulrich Brand* and *Markus Wissen* for a broader discussion, as will be done in this Special Section. *Ulrich Brand* and *Markus Wissen* start the discussion by summarizing the main features of their concept and, above all, by highlighting its relevance as a spatial category that has asymmetrical relationships between places, regions and spatial types as its basic structuring principle and continues to perpetuate them. The Brazilian economist, geographer and regional scientist *Ivo Marcos Theis* subsequently takes up the concept of the Imperial Mode of Living in order

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to examine – from a perspective of the Global South, so to speak – its suitability for explaining Brazil’s social and spatial inequalities and contradictions in their historical development and in their current configurations. In doing so, the explanatory approaches of the main representatives of the classical Brazilian social sciences form an important point of reference. Using the examples of cattle ranching in Amazonia, soy production in the Midwest, and mining in the Southeast, the author shows the presence of the Imperial Mode of Living in contemporary Brazil and how it manifests itself in socioeconomic, socioecological, and spatial inequality. Based on their own long-term research in Argentina, *Felix Dorn*, *Robert Hafner*, *Fernando Ruiz Peyré*, and *Julieta Krapovickas* review the (theoretical) approach of the Imperial Mode of Living for its suitability as an analytical concept for empirical field research. In doing so, they see a great opportunity for human geography to give empirical “grounding” to the concept of the Imperial Mode of Living, which they aim to demonstrate using the three thematic areas of soy production incorporated into global value chains, the extraction of lithium, a “strategic raw material” highly relevant to the global sustainability shift, and transhumance as a “traditional” livelihood system. Their findings on the question of how the Imperial Mode of Living manifests itself on the ground, what adaptation mechanisms but also counter-reactions look like, lead them to propose the complementary concepts of an “Imperial Mode of Surviving” and a “Counter-Imperial Mode of Living” respectively. *Florian Dünckmann*, *Silja Klepp* and *Jonas Hein* base their contribution to the concept of the Imperial Mode of Living on the basic approach that it is essentially a problem of global justice. In doing so, they devote particular attention to the idea of ELSEWHERE, which, from the perspective of *Brand* and *Wissen*, is crucial for the maintenance of the Imperial Mode of Living. In this context, the paper

discusses the concept of Communities of Justice and its relevance to global spatial logics determined by the limits of moral responsibility.

Although the contributions to this Special Section can only address and discuss some facets of the concept of the Imperial Mode of Living, they agree that the Imperial Mode of Living approach can be an important stimulus for geographical research and, on the other hand, that geography and regional studies can make a significant contribution to the further development of the approach and its relevance to space.

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