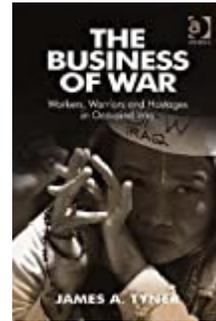




**James A. Tyner.** *The Business of War: Workers, Warriors, and Hostages in Occupied Iraq.* Burlington: Ashgate, 2006. viii + 152 pp. \$99.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7546-4791-1.



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### What Kind of War Does Neoliberalism Make?

In *The Business of War*, James A. Tyner provides an engaged and readable synthesis of scholarship and informed polemic produced in response to the Anglo-American invasion and occupation of Iraq. He situates this synthesis within a broader intellectual framework that draws on Michel Foucault, as well as on the work of geographers and ethnographers concerned with contemporary configurations of neoliberal globalism (e.g., David Harvey, Derek Gregory, Aiwha Ong, etc.). In line with the method suggested by these sources, Tyner begins by tracing the genealogy of assumptions invoked to naturalize the Bush administration's Iraq project—notably the sense of manifest destiny that has informed so much of America's engagement with the rest of the world over the past 200 years—and by sketching the broader history of corporate involvement in determining U.S. foreign policy interests (these being the subjects of chapter 2, "A War of Neoliberalism"). As Tyner notes, "we should not lose sight that economic ideologies—including but not limited to neoliberalism and neoconservatism—have greatly impacted the role and function of the military" (p. 16).

But this book is ultimately motivated by a more pro-

found sense of purpose. Tyner sets out to explore the nexus of neoliberalism and war by looking at how this intersection has inscribed itself on the bodies of migrant contract laborers held hostage in Iraq. In his own words: "My aim is to examine the political subjugation of hostages within Occupied Iraq as a means of articulating the de-humanization of neoliberalism and the business of war" (p. 4). This is a theme that Tyner appears to have stumbled across while on the heels of the Filipino migrant laborers who were the subject of his previous work. And it is one that is certainly worth exploring. Tyner sees the bodies of these hostages as emblematic of struggles to define the nature of the contemporary global system.

Iraq clearly represents a new phase in "the business of war." Not only have the support functions of state-declared war been privatized to an extent previously unseen; close examination of the practices of private contractors in Iraq reveals the darker side of a world that has gradually been remade over the past three decades to make it amenable to neoliberal modalities of government. The role of the neoliberal model in Iraq's reconstruction is outlined in the first half of chapter 3, "The

Business of Occupation.” Tyner then calls attention to the contract laborers who have come from the slums of East Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America to work for the private firms providing support services to the U.S. Army and other agencies involved in the reconstruction and government of Iraq. Tyner shows how this flow of migrant labor has been made possible by new forms of cooperation between state agencies and a transnational private sector empowered by neoliberal reforms. He also shows that these invisible minions play a crucial role in making the human and financial costs of war acceptable to the U.S. public. Meanwhile, for militant groups, these migrants have—in Tyner’s estimation—come to symbolize the militant neoliberal imperialism of the Anglo-American project in Iraq.

Unfortunately, Tyner only begins the serious exploration of his central thesis midway into the fourth and penultimate chapter, “Spaces of Political Subjugation.” Here, Tyner brings us to the plight of the hostages themselves by building on analysis of the Philippine government’s position in advance of the Iraq war. Philippine authorities hoped, according to Tyner, that participation in the “coalition of the willing” would facilitate employment opportunities for Filipino laborers in the private-sector-led reconstruction effort. Tyner illustrates the consequences of such a policy by exploring the case of Angelo de la Cruz, a Filipino migrant laborer who was held hostage in Iraq for a relatively brief period in the summer of 2004.

Tyner writes: “During de la Cruz’s captivity, both the Philippine state, the Iraqi insurgents, and other participants attempted to inscribe their own discourses on to the captive body of de la Cruz. Although powerlessness [*sic*] himself, de la Cruz continued to be subjected to various interpretations and meanings; his body, in effect, continued to work, albeit for larger political purposes.â From the perspective of the captors, de la Cruz was not an individual [but represented] something else entirely â the Coalition [and] the abstract concepts of modernity and capitalism. This is made clear in the demands made by the abductors” (p. 122).

But Tyner does not in fact provide any convincing evidence that resistance to such abstract concepts lay behind the demands of most hostage-takers in Iraq, and it strikes me as presumptuous to suggest that most Iraqi militants imagine themselves as foes of modernity or capitalism *per se*. Equally, his subsequent assertion—that “the bodies of workers and warriors, from the perspective of the abductors, are re-scripted as the personification of

an illegal and unjustified occupation of their homeland” (p. 123)—seems somehow too easy a conclusion given the ambitious nature of this book. In trying to produce a meditation on the phenomenon of hostage-taking writ large—a political-philosophical polemic in the tradition of George Orwell and Slavoj Žižek (two authors whose inspiration Tyner acknowledges)—Tyner loses touch with local specificities. For example, he does not note that the overwhelming majority of foreigners taken hostage in Iraq have been truck drivers, suggesting that hostage-taking might—for most groups—be a tactic employed in struggles over the control of trade routes. Flying high in search of a profound interpretation, Tyner overlooks the mundane, if not always obvious, alternative. And it is perhaps in the mundane rather than the heroic that we might find and understand the most powerful (and even universal) motivations of the agents in the story.

*The Business of War* clearly bears the strains of being Tyner’s third book in as many years. The relatively large number of typographical errors suggests a lack of careful editing. Some of the literature that he reviews does not seem fully integrated into his argument; and Tyner’s occasional reliance on a single source across significant passages of text reinforce the impression of a manuscript hurried to publication before the author had come to a fully digested synthesis. The force of Tyner’s central argument is also weakened from the outset by his somewhat rushed (even slightly pedantic) discussions of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, globalization, transnationalism, and security. Given his promise to deliver “a political geographical polemic against the atrocities of a modern-day colonial war” (p. 2), Tyner might have found a more subtle way of integrating this background information into his account. Also, just when Tyner seems poised to take his argument in an interesting direction, he all too often falls back on the words of others, or on restatements of his main thesis that read somewhat like sloganeering. It is precisely because Tyner has an interesting and important argument to make that one would like to hear more of his own voice. Finally, as the critique in the previous paragraph suggests, Tyner would have done well to consult more of the specialist literature on Iraq, together with the available empirical studies of the occupation and the subsequent ongoing violence before meditating on the motivations of insurgent hostage takers.

Nevertheless, in spite of these critical remarks, the individual chapters of this book—and particularly chapter 3—make useful reading for both students and the informed public. Tyner’s writing is readable and engaging.

Most importantly, however, Tyner is to be commended for calling attention to the large-scale exploitation of migrant labor as a practice enabled by three decades of worldwide neoliberal “reform,” and one that ultimately enabled the Bush administration to go to war thinking that the full political costs might be avoided. He is absolutely correct to argue that investigation of this practice will likely offer insight into the nexus of neoliberalism and war, and to the darker side of neoliberal globalism more generally. This reviewer hopes that Tyner will continue to follow through on the important themes addressed by *The Business of War* in his future research.

In conclusion, I cannot help but wonder what this book might have been had Tyner pursued a different (albeit admittedly longer and more difficult) route in writing it. One could have told the story of how a nineteenth-century ideology of manifest destiny gave rise to twenty-first-century neoliberal militarism—a project that Tyner shows is underwritten by the labor of some of the world’s

poorest and most politically disempowered inhabitants—through a deep and sustained account of Angelo de la Cruz’s personal and family history. What historical forces give rise to conditions that compel someone to travel halfway around the world to work for meager wages in a war zone? What arrangements make possible the linkages and pathways that enable such a journey? What did such a journey entail? And what does the imprisonment and decapitation that awaited some of these migrants upon reaching their destination say about the kind of war neoliberalism makes? As Walter Benjamin wrote: “Only when traveling along the road, can you say something about its force.”[1]

Note

[1]. Walter Benjamin, “Berlin Childhood around 1900,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 352.

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