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## Korstanje, M. A Difficult World: Examining the Roots of Capitalism. New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2015.

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**Korstanje, M. *A Difficult World: Examining the Roots of Capitalism.*  
New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2015.**

Certain events in the world just within the present generation could not escape anyone's notice. These include climate change, global inequality, incessant wars, creeping authoritarianism in presumably democratic states, and the dominance by neoliberal-oriented supranational organizations, among others. To one degree or another, all the above events are given a frame of reference in a welcome new book by Maximiliano Korstanje titled *A Difficult World: Examining the Roots of Capitalism*. With a Foreword by Geoffrey Skoll for context, Korstanje organizes his book around nine inter-related chapters followed by a brief Epilogue, each chapter dealing with specialized topics. Altogether, they deal with mutually reinforcing themes.

Perhaps the most central of all themes concerns the origins of capitalism, particularly its cultural and religious foundations. Korstanje asserts that capitalism actually evolved out of Norse mythology and Viking adventurism integral to which is the notion of predestination. This, in turn, was adopted as a bedrock of Calvinist Protestantism throughout much of the Anglo-Saxon world. This fact, according to Korstanje, was overlooked by Max Weber, widely recognized for associating the growth of capitalism almost exclusively to the Protestant ethos, providing impetus both to missionary zeal and to capitalist growth, especially among settlers in the New World. Despite this, Weber had no explanation for why the city of Venice was a successful capitalist trading center, along with various other Catholic city-states throughout Italy. Weber's critics, including Korstanje, point out that it was not so much Protestantism, after all, that fueled capitalism's growth but, rather, aspects of Norse mythology.

This theme is discussed more in Chapter 5, "Exploring the Anglo-Protestant Cosmology." There Korstanje writes: "Since Protestantism has developed a negative image of the external world, its hopes of salvation [were] in predestination" (p. 48). Further, he contends, the salvation of the soul had become the primary concern of the evangelicals and that their shared religious beliefs and experience were a source of solace and strength as they ventured out into the New World's wilderness and as they dealt with the indigenous inhabitants of the land, evolving into the "American character" and playing a central role in shaping an ethnocentric political community.

In the formation of this political community, Korstanje acknowledges the role of human agency. He writes: "The allegory of the city has been used [to examine] the capitalist ethos [and its role in forming] social bonds. Any metropolis condenses the accumulation of human resources, capital and production, and it expresses the dialectics of machine and the work force" (p. xv). In so doing, Korstanje affirms the verity of Karl Marx's thesis about the central role of capital, writing: "The ghost in the machine of capitalism is that capital mediates between production and workers just as ego corresponds with the interplay between repression and reason [as articulated by Sigmund Freud]" (p. xv). While Weber wrote that capitalism may have been a "cultural process with legal-rational logic," Korstanje notes that it has, in fact, also "modified almost all social institutions of the industrial world," ensuring that what is regarded as "democracy" is a product of the mode of production distinct only to capitalism (p. xvii).

Regarding the rise of the nation-state and the function it serves for capitalism, we recall a phrase in Skoll's Foreword: the US government serves as capitalism's "executive branch." Korstanje pursues this assertion in several chapters but especially in Chapters 2, "The Future of Technology;" 3, "Crossing the Boundaries of Empire;" and 4, "The Logic of Risk. The resort to

technology, as discussed in Chapter 2, is traceable to the Norse mythology of predestination which forecloses any outcome other than what has been ordained. Thus, Anglo-Saxon thinkers, pragmatic and secular in their orientation, are confronted with the dilemma of denying the validity of this ancient myth by resorting to technology as a means of predicting risks, and, at the same time, controlling the environment as a means of predetermining the future. In Chapter 3, "Crossing the Boundaries of Empire," Korstanje highlights not only the role of the state in controlling risks of terrorism against itself but in inflicting the same to its chosen targets, linking this to its assertion of exceptionalism above all others. Thus, Korstanje concludes: "Far from being democratic, [US laws have been] systematically designed to protect the interests of financial corporations" (p. 21) even to the point of sacrificing the welfare of workers and minority communities of color. And, in Chapter 4, Korstanje offers an unconventional understanding of risks by regarding it, not as mere "probabilities of hazards, dangers, or losses" but, rather, as "narratives serving to modify human behavior" (p. 33). The significance of this is in its assignation to the state the role of defining and countering risks. Amplifying analytical categories derived from Freud and Marx, Korstanje asserts that the state exploits totems and fetishes to create an illusion, one psychological, the other political, respectively, for purposes of maintaining relations of production beneficial to the ruling class and in the context of the bourgeoisie always "revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society" (p. 34).

The rise of the US empire and its claim to exceptionalism are dealt with in the interrelated Chapters 6, "Terrorism, Work-Force and Labor;" 7, "Discussing Terrorism: Isolationists vs. Interventionists;" and 8, "The Principle of Exemptionalism [sic] in America." In Chapter 6, Korstanje explains the US claim to exceptionalism in the first half of the twentieth century was reinforced by US President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Four Freedoms, of which Freedom from Want had the most economic impact. It sought to establish a largely consumer-based economy as the best antidote to poverty. Ironically, as Korstanje noted, "The frenetic quest for profits led societies to adopt consumer-oriented system of productions which produced what consumers wanted" (p. 60). This principle was internationalized and became an unquestioned basis for international economic relations through trade, even dictating strategies of development. Korstanje writes: "The market gave interesting new opportunities for capital investment (by stimulating mass-consumption), by reducing the genuine growth of society" (p. 60). The discussion of terrorism in Chapter 7 extends to Chapter 6. Without speculating on whether or not it resulted from a conspiracy, Korstanje assesses the impact of the World Trade Center airplane-bombing on September 11, 2001, as serving "to create fear in population with the end of generating a self-indoctrination" as in the idea that the US was an innocent victim. This claim is interrogated more critically in Chapter 8 when Korstanje suggests that the US not only reserved the right to act unilaterally to avenge violence committed against itself, it also claimed the prerogative to engage in "preventive war" against any state, group, or individual, even if there may not be tangible proof against the would-be victim. In Korstanje's rather strained English, "The sense of manifest destiny paves the ways [sic] for the advent of Imperialism, but American this is the paradox [sic] do not see themselves as agents of Empire" (p. 93).

The theme of exceptionalism and the assertion of a leadership role by the US resonates especially in Chapters 1, "Mobility on [sic] an Immobile World: The Analysis of the Film *The Island* [sic];" again, 2, "The Future of Technology;" and, 9, "The Society of Terror." First off, Korstanje offers an understanding of the characteristics of contemporary globalization in Chapter 9 by identifying two key elements, namely: (1) money as having come to "serve as a mechanism

of connecting presence with absences, or needs with their satisfaction throughout the world,” and (2) the presence of a “network of experts, who not only evaluate potential risks but also devise ways for mitigating risks” (p. 116). Later, in the same chapter, Korstanje alludes to “conditions of production” having reached “hyper-mobility in the world” (p. 120). This is exemplified by progress in “digital technology,” discussed more in Chapter 2, wherein peoples around the globe are now connected “in seconds, distributing information from one to another corner of the globe” (p. 120). However, under this condition, Korstanje recognizes that “at bottom, the old logic of exploitation, enrooted [sic] in the late-capitalism persists.” This is evidenced by what Naomi Klein, whom Korstanje cites, referred to as “disaster capitalism” wherein “[g]lobal leaders not only take the opportunity of crises to impose policies [that] otherwise would be neglected by the citizens, but use fear to undermine the political upheavals and resistance” (p. 120).

The matter of social mobility is complemented by the parallel issue of physical mobility. Korstanje takes up the latter in Chapter 1, “Mobility on [sic] an Immobile World: The Analysis of the Film *The Island* [sic];” and, again, Chapter 6, cited earlier. In both of these chapters, constraints to and conditions impacting travel are discussed. In Chapter 1, the fictional movie “*The Island*” is reviewed wherein, in the story, the bulk of the cloned population is confined to a laboratory compound. While travel outside is a taboo, a trip to the Island is possible but only by lottery and presented as a valued prize. In fact, however, clones who win the lottery and are able to make it to the Island end up having their organs harvested for wealthy buyers. They are made to believe that they are just like human beings with full freedom in this make-believe state, that is, until a pair of self-determining clones discover the truth and tries to escape. Korstanje likens this escape to a diaspora wherein people are uprooted from their native land. By reviewing this film, Korstanje seeks to expose several features of contemporary neoliberal globalization including the power of corporations, in this case, biotech companies, that have been empowered to determine who gets to live or to die. Control of population movements as symbolized by the building of separation walls or the enactment of stringent immigration laws is another feature. These attempts at control of population movements may be in response to the impact of climate change, inter-ethnic conflicts, resource wars, and the demand for specialized labor in wealthier regions of the globe to sustain their lifestyle or level of industrial productivity.

In Chapter 6, Korstanje discusses the kind of travel – tourism – that is subject to the vicissitudes of the times including terrorism and government manipulation. Tourism, a voluntary form of travel, has nonetheless necessitated risk assessment and has, further, lent the state its share of legitimacy, defending it as “a universal benefit to human kind,” by promoting travels to memorials to cultivate selective memory of past suffering, acts of heroism, or violence against the innocents giving rise to what Korstanje refers to as “dark tourism,” i.e., promotion of consumption through the exploitation of “human morbidity and sadism” as forms of consumption (p. 65).

The value of Korstanje’s book lies in its courage and competence in tackling its subject from a critical vantage point. It offers the reader a type of understanding that is rare in other conventional texts. It succeeds in shedding light on the landscape of capitalism, including its mythological, religious, and cultural foundations; the roots of the US claim to exceptionalism; and the manifestations of neoliberal globalization. This reader, however, wished to have better explained a few things including the significance of Venice as a Catholic center of capitalist commerce during its time, and why Venice could not be replicated as a model of development for Catholic South America in contrast to Protestant North America. Further, this reader would have been happy to see a critical analysis of diaspora as inferred from the review of “*The Island*” to

the impact of colonial policies on human movements, e.g., the British policy of using indentured workers from South Asia to other parts of its empire or, for the matter, the phenomenon of Overseas Foreign Workers (OFWs) from indigent countries in the Global South traveling to and offering their services to relatively affluent countries in the Global North. Needless to say, this reader is impressed by the depth and breadth of Korstanje's philosophical and theoretical understanding, his acquaintance with the literature, and his ability to integrate varying perspectives. But with his acquaintance with Marxist thought, his critique of capitalism, and the intimacy of the US empire with violence throughout its history, this reader wonders if Korstanje would go so far as to acknowledge the centrality of historical materialism as an approach and, from this acknowledgement, what alternative to capitalism might have issued. Those who appreciate his critical perspectives, like this reader, would read through his work with patience and understanding. However, there are those who may not be won over, such as those with little patience to plod through the numerous typographical and stylistic errors, and poorly constructed sentences. They would argue – and this reader concurs – that the book might have immensely benefited from an experienced professional copy editor and a proof reader prior to it being forwarded to the press.

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