

A Complex System of Suppression: Review of Darren Byler's "Terror Capitalism: Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City"

Heß, Michael Reinhard

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Heß, M. R. (2023). A Complex System of Suppression: Review of Darren Byler's "Terror Capitalism: Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City". *Soziopolis: Gesellschaft beobachten*. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-90234-3>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

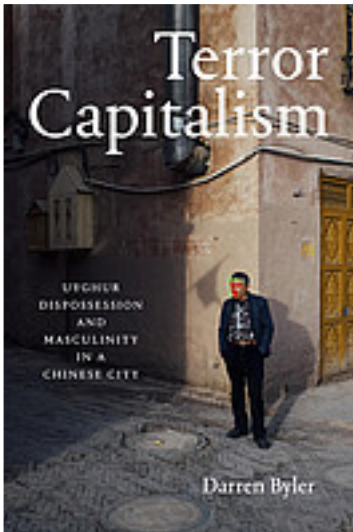
Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Michael Reinhard Heß | Rezension | 25.09.2023

A Complex System of Suppression

Review of Darren Byler's „Terror Capitalism. Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City“



Darren Byler

**Terror Capitalism . Uyghur Dispossession
and Masculinity in a Chinese City**

Großbritannien

Durham und London 2022: Duke University

Press

xxi, 269 S., 27,95 \$

ISBN 978-1-4780-1764-6

Following the continuous deterioration of their situation, the Xinjiang Uyghurs have been receiving more and more scholarly attention across the globe in recent years. Darren Byler's book makes an important contribution to the process of drawing attention to the Uyghurs' plight.

The essence of the work is the description of more than 24 months of anthropological (or ethnographic, Byler uses both terms) fieldwork, which the author conducted in Xinjiang between 2011 and 2018 (essentially in 2011 and 2014), and the rendering of its results. With one notable exception (the Han Chinese photographic artist Chen Ye, who has extraordinarily tight ties to Xinjiang's Uyghur community), as good as all the informants Byler presents in his book are Uyghurs. The study itself duly considers that the People's Republic of China's (PRC) massive oppression campaign in Xinjiang is also directed against other Muslim minorities including Kazakhs and Kirghiz. Yet the focus is on the by far most numerous and prominent victim group, the Uyghurs. In addition, all of Byler's informants are male. This is a conscious preference on the part of the author, which is directly related to his interpretation of the situation, and which is also reflected in the title of his book.

The greatest merit of *Terror Capitalism* possibly lies in its directness and intimacy in presenting Uyghurs' own perspective on the suppression of their and other minorities' freedom and rights in Xinjiang. In contradistinction to public revelations of the nature and dimension of the PRC's oppressive system from the outside, which have been spearheaded by Adrian Zenz, and to first-hand experience reports by Uyghurs and other minority members who have written about the subject,¹ Byler combines direct statements of victims and other affected persons that have been drawn from direct personal interlocution with a thought-out scholarly perspective. In doing so, the author devotes much space to the description of the circumstances of his encounters with his informants, whose statements are sometimes represented in page length (see, for instance, pages 126–131). After reading the book, one will not only have a good idea of the overall situation of the Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim minorities in Xinjiang and about some of the historical and political factors that have brought it about. Much more importantly, the extensive amount of the witness statements that are translated, explained, and contextualized by the author will have conveyed much about what must feel like to fall victim to ethno-racist persecution and exploitation by the PRC. This comprehensiveness of Byler's approach, which combines inside and outside perspectives, allows him to fulfill his claim to describe the complexity of the whole system of suppression, of which, as he argues (p. 5), the "reeducation" (再教育营 zài jiàoyú) camps are but a small portion.

Yet another strong point of Byler's study, which gives it an almost unique position amongst work dedicated to the present-day Chinese Uyghurs, is the author's combination of material gained from field work and theoretical approaches from various layers with a discussion of selected examples from modern Uyghur literary fiction. The obvious ease with which Byler is able to switch from descriptions of the physical settings of his field work, statements of his study participants and the secondary literature to detailed, innovative and subtle interpretations of pieces of literature (see, for instance, p. 148 f., 154), and his capacity to make these spheres interact, is impressive. This multidisciplinary approach seems to be extremely well adapted to the particular subject of his study because some of the informants Byler talked to were also writers, had literary ambitions, and/or were avid consumers of modern Uyghur literary fiction as well as of Uyghur films, TV, and other media.

As for the methodological framework that guides Byler's study, it uses the term "terror capitalism" as an overarching category to describe the oppressive situation in Xinjiang. Arguably, the expression appropriately names two of the central aspects of PRC's policy towards the Uyghurs and other minorities in Xinjiang, namely its obviously brutal and

exploitative nature. At the same time, it also deemphasizes the role of the Chinese state, including concrete actors such as individuals and institutions, in bringing about this oppressive system. Instead, the special Xinjiang “capitalism” that is qualified by “terror” is presented as something that functions through abstract economic and political mechanisms that exist in other places on the globe as well. This eventually inspires Byler to draw a comparison between PRC’s “terror capitalism” and the situations in Kashmir and Palestine in the conclusion chapter (p. 228).

At this point, one may bring up the question whether the two elements “terror” and “capitalism” together really constitute a sufficient characterization of the essence of anti-Uyghur policy in the PRC. To the explanatory focus on terror and capitalism might be objected that even during Byler’s field study the PRC still was a self-declared communist state, in which the Communist Party counted dozens of millions of members and was all-powerful. In Byler’s view, considering communism (as an ideology or as a system of political institutions) obviously does not make a decisive contribution to the understanding of the situation – the word “communism” does not even appear in the index. Against Byler’s underemphasizing of the state’s role and of communism in the oppressive system one might concretely point to the fact that the oppression of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang already began in the 1950s, i.e., in a period when PRC’s communist regime could hardly be described as capitalist. Although Byler himself mentions this historical background in the preface (p. xiv), he nonetheless does not give the communist factor more than cursory attention in any place throughout the book. Yet, the inspiration that much of the oppressive apparatus mobilized by the PRC against the Uyghurs and other groups has taken from communist traditions (be it local or Soviet ones) is palpable even in many passages of Byler’s own account, including in such unmistakably communist word creations such as “People’s Convenience Police Station” or “all people’s health check” (p. 31 f.). In particular, the unleashing of the “People’s War on Terror” in 2014 and the intensification of the anti-Uyghur oppression from the end of 2016 onward were direct results of decisions taken by leading figures of the PRC’s party hierarchy and did not only happen as the result of quasi-natural processes inherent in such abstract ideas as “capitalism”². In some passages, the tight connection between the oppressive situation in Xinjiang and China’s Communist Party becomes evident even from Byler’s own analysis. For instance, on page 177 he explains the term 单位 (wèitā) in the context of “work units under the discipline of party-state-directed modes of production” while simultaneously mentioning that “it also describes the way terror capitalism reduced Uyghur migrants to their data and labor power, transforming their bodies into biometric code”. This reveals that Byler does not regard “party-state-directed modes of production” and “terror capitalism” to be strictly separate things.

However, whereas “terror” and “capitalism” find their way in Byler’s theoretical framework, communism and its manifestations (such as the party-state) do not.

This deemphasizing of both the state and communism (apart from occasional short mentions as on page 42; in other cases, such as on page 69, Byler prefers the term “Maoist” over “communist”), which are partly congruent in the given case, becomes somewhat suspicious if one considers that the theoretical framework referred to by Byler is dotted with (although mostly superficial) references to authors that can be considered as part of the global leftist, if not even socialist or communist, tradition, such as Foucault and even Marx himself (p. 34 f.). It cannot be excluded, therefore, that Byler’s terminological and methodological framework might reproduce the well-known reluctance of left-oriented European and North American intellectuals to acknowledge the role that socialism and communism, and in particular communist ideologies and states, have played in bringing about totalitarian systems of state control, oppression, and annihilation of ‘deviating’ opinions, cultures, and people in the 20th and 21st century. As a matter of fact, the PRC’s “terror capitalism” in Xinjiang is also communist terror state capitalism.

Within the broad flow of anthropology, Byler situates his approach within the currents of decolonial and gender studies (p. xix, 101, etc.). One reason for applying this methodological choice to the study of the Xinjiang Uyghurs is Byler’s finding that most of the researchers that analyze similar forms of “surveillance capitalism” still focus on “middle-class, heteronormative, and white” experimentees (quotes from page 18). There can be no doubt that the category of gender (as a social construct) is relevant to the Xinjiang case as the PRC government itself asserted to ‘save’ Uyghurs from the supposed weight of traditional Islamic Uyghur interpretations of gender relations (p. 24 f.). Hence, the inclusion of the gender aspect in Byler’s study is a necessary and appropriate element.

In the main part of the book, Byler devotes much space to the social institution of friendship, to which he dedicates a whole chapter (p. 133–162). He sees “anticolonial friendships” as one of the means that allow young Uyghurs to adapt to the conditions of the oppressive regime and the “enclosure” it entails (p. 3; similar statements are found on page 28 f. etc.). Of course, friendships help individuals to get by better in any kind of difficult situation. However, it is less easy to ascertain whether a given type of friendship is really “anticolonial” in the sense that this “anticolonial” character would be stated literally or implicitly by all of its participants. As a matter of fact, much of the “anticolonial friendship” discussed by Byler in the book are friendships in which he himself is one of the partners. Byler even states this to be the result of a theoretical imperative: “In some contexts, the

work of anthropology itself should be framed as anticolonial friendship.” (p. 25)

Here Byler and his readers are faced with the danger of succumbing to the observer’s paradox and mistaking the researcher’s own positions, premises (or even prejudices) for evidence. That this danger becomes virulent can be seen, for instance, in Byler’s overstretched interpretation of hand-painted signs that bore the Uyghur word *yärlik* (“local, regional, belonging to the place”) and announced such commodities as honey, rice, and wheat (p. 39). Without even mentioning the evident main purpose of these signs, i.e., announcing the commodities and that these did not come from far away or abroad but from the region (cf. such commonly used Uyghur expressions as *yärlik vaqit* meaning “local time”), Byler indulges in half a page of speculations relating to cultural anthropology without providing any reference to original sources or informants. In what can only be regarded as an unfounded imposition of Western stereotypes relating to cultural anthropology, Byler claims, among other things, that those signs “were making a claim to belonging and building the future of a particular Native community and sacred landscape”. This is pure fiction. Even the particular meaning supposed to be associated with the use of the capitalized word “Native” seems to be hard to derive from any kind of Uyghur original document, as the Uyghur Araboid alphabet does not distinguish between small and capital letters and no corresponding phonetical distinction exists in spoken Uyghur language.

The central problem of Byler’s import of “wokeness”-inspired terminology such as “Native” to the Xinjiang Uyghur context and of not evidence-based interpretations of original terms such as *yärlik* is the disregard of the historical reality that they bespeak. This lack of attention for historicity can also be seen in the case of the ethnonym “Uyghur”. Byler considers the Uyghurs, and sometimes other ethnic groups, to be the “Natives” of Xinjiang. This becomes obvious, for instance, when he speaks about the region as “Uyghur and Kazakh homelands” (p. 228). However, to regard the ethnic group that has been using the self-designation “Uyghur” for a century or so as “Native” of this region is not without methodological difficulties and would require further explanations. As is known, the ethnonym “Uyghur” has been systematically in use for this ethnic group only from the beginning of the 1920s onward, when it was established with the help (or perhaps even on the instigation) of people (such as Russians) that were arguably not “Native” to the region. Byler’s romantic cliché of the alleged “Nativity” of the Uyghurs, which serves to a fashionable trend in anthropology and ethnography, could only be convincing if one disregarded essential facts of Uyghur history, including the fact that the introduction of the word “Uyghur” as an official ethnonym was at least in part the product of Bolshevik colonization. It was finally decided upon on the 1921 Tashkent conference, and before that

time the same ethnic group had been denoted by a plethora of terms including “Sarts”, “Taranči”, “inhabitants of Kashgar”, “inhabitants of Aqsu”, etc. Through his ahistorical perspective, Byler *de facto* practices a kind of (soft-spoken) cultural imperialism (which chiefly comes from a thoroughly “capitalist” country, the United States). Of course, this practice does not have the same brutal and inhumane concomitants as China’s “terror capitalism” but it nevertheless replaces the Uyghurs’ own voice and documented history with what some contemporary “woke” Western observers would like to imagine them. This behavior contains an element of paradox and irony, as Byler believes himself to be an exponent of “decolonial” theories.

One final word may be lost about a technical aspect of the book. Byler’s knowledge of local languages is truly impressive. From reading the book, one can infer that he is able to converse in both Uyghur and Chinese fluently. Yet, the text contains a number of false translations, interpretations, and transcriptions of Uyghur terms, and some of them have important implications for the interpretative framework. This becomes obvious in the translation of the Uyghur word *yoq* as “don’t exist” (in reference to people) on page 206. To say that someone “does not exist” would by any standard normally mean that he or she is dead or has never been born. However, this is not a sense the word *yoq* expresses under all circumstances. Both in the above context and more generally speaking, it may simply indicate the physical absence of somebody or something from a place. For instance, a major monolingual Uyghur dictionary explains the meaning of *yoq bolmaq* as “to become separated from everything, to be removed from sight, to disappear, to get lost” (*hämmidin ayrilmaq, köz aldidin neri kätmək, ğayib bolmaq, yitmäk*)³. By translating *yoq* as “don’t exist”, Byler creates the incorrect impression that the persons in question were actually dead whereas the original phrase only means that they are absent. In the context of Xinjiang, this of course is a crucial distinction. Also, a number of Byler’s translations of Uyghur terms into English obviously do not systematically take into consideration grammatical classes and relationships. As a number of these terms play a crucial role in the interpretational framework, this is a circumstance some readers might find at least confusing. For instance, “rohi sulghun” is translated as “breaking the spirit” on page 12, whereas the original term (probably **rohi sunġan*, if one considers the transcription “rohi sunghan” on page 224, where it is also translated as “breaking the spirit”, and the parallel passage on page 185) in fact would denote somebody or something “whose spirit has been broken”. *Özüm дәp oyläymän* (transcribed as “özüm dep oylimen”, p. 121) means “I think that it’s myself”, rather than “think for themselves”). Overall, the way Byler transcribes and translates Uyghur language betrays a certain lack of rigor, which may not be an entirely negligible aspect against the backdrop of the importance Byler attaches to some of the

translated terms in his argumentation.

To summarize, one should be skeptical about the soundness, validity, and comprehensiveness of Byler's methodological framework, and there are doubts as to his ability to interpret original source material with the necessary scholarly rigor. These shortcomings might be amongst the factors that contribute to Byler's own rather pessimistic conclusion about the meaning of his work (p. 219): „Listening to their stories [the reference is to some of Byler's Uyghur informants – M. R. H.] and trying to retell them are powerful reminders that ethnography *always fails*.” [emphasis by M. R. H.] The only thing that this kind of work was able to produce could be a kind of “palliative comfort” (*ibid.*). Against Byler's quasi homoerotic mention of “this intimacy, sitting knee to knee, with these people” [meant are the informants, M. R. H.] one may conclude that this “palliative comfort” is also self-comfort on the part of Western anthropologists.

In the end, this “decolonial” study repeats many of the classical colonial attitudes it avowedly sets out to replace, such as imposing one's own views on the informants and instrumentalizing them as a source of one's own pleasure and satisfaction. It is evident that his outcome is a result of Byler's conscious choice to minimalize or even eliminate the distance between himself and the object of his study, which he, after all, still refers to as “research” (p. 221). Still, the book can be highly recommended to anyone who wants to get a direct introduction to the overall situation the Xinjiang Uyghurs are exposed to, and to the way they react to it.

Endnoten

1. Abduvāli Ayup, Türmä xatiriliri: mähbus rohlar [Prison memories. Captured souls], Istanbul 2021.
2. Kèzhì Zhào, 赵志刚(2018年6月15日)在听新疆维吾尔自治区公安厅和维稳工作组汇报时(2018年6月15日) [[Speech Given While Listening to the Report on Public Security and Stability Work on the Xinjiang Autonomous Region on June 15, 2018](#)].
3. Abliz Yaqub, et al., Uyğur tiliniñ izahliq luğiti [An annotated dictionary of the Uyghur language], 6 Volumes, Beijing 1990–1998, p. 597.

Michael Reinhard Heß

PD Dr. Michael Reinhard Heß, M.A., ist Turkologe und Übersetzer und arbeitet gegenwärtig als Wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter im von der Fritz Thyssen Stiftung geförderten Projekt „Die uigurische Prosaliteratur in der VR China von der Reformära bis zur erneuten Repression (1981–2017)“ an der Universität Gießen.

Dieser Beitrag wurde redaktionell betreut von Stephanie Kappacher.

Artikel auf soziopolis.de:

<https://www.sozopolis.de/a-complex-system-of-suppression.html>