

Contrasting Development Experiences of the Arab World and East Asia

Review of Dr. Ali Kadri's Book entitled: The Cordon Sanitaire: A Single Law Governing Development in East Asia and the Arab World

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Global Research, August 12, 2019

[Wiley Online Library](#) 5 February 2019

Region: [Asia](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#),
[USA](#)

Theme: [Global Economy](#), [History](#), [Oil and Energy](#)

On the surface, it might be incongruous to assert that there is a single law that has shaped what appear to be the contrasting development experiences of the Arab World (AW) and East Asia (EA). After all, as Ali Kadri indicates in this important and challenging book, the economic and social data suggests EA has industrialized, and AW has not, war in both regions has led to the expansion of development in EA, based on the sale of civilian end use commodities, whereas the AW has experienced continuous war and conflict and is integrated into the world economy via militarization and strategic control of oil.

There is, however, a single unifying theme that links not only these two regions but all parts of the globe and that is the role of US imperialism. EA in fact is part of the US cordon sanitaire intended to restrict the advance of China, and as Kadri demonstrates, the AW is dominated by the destructive forces of US and Israeli led devastation of people, machines, technology, and the means by which people can socially reproduce themselves.

The unifying link between EA and AW is that in the post WW2 period "US-led imperialism sought arresting the expansion of China and promoting the expansion of Israel" (p. 4) and that is the context in which the different development challenges need to be gauged.

This is not always an easy read. There is an absence of empirical data and narrative around which to unpick the similarities and differences between and within EA and AW. The book is also in need of a serious editing. The five chapters that comprise the monograph are theoretical in nature and sometimes very abstract. However, the infusion of theory and rigor is a welcome antidote to neoclassical economic development tropes and neo-liberal explanations for the perceived relative successes and failures of the two regions. Ali Kadri is at his best when he undermines the mainstream accounts of development, the contrasts in economic performance between the two regions and why war and violence needs to be more accurately understood as an essential structural feature of capitalist development. He shows this well when he documents the disastrous impact of US imperialism in the AW and collusion with Israel to destroy national regional attempts to control local means of production. He does not view violence as exogenous or its persistence as a product of local pathology. Instead, the very context for development was first laid down by European and then later by US imperialist violence.

This is a far cry from the liberal lament that if only there was a full acceptance and delivery

of responsibility to protect (R2P), the world and with it “development” would be a better place and further advanced. On the contrary, Ali Kadri argues that violence is at the heart of imperialism; therefore, there is little chance that the US, EU, and Japan (what the late Samir Amin called the imperial triad) will do anything to soften or end the role that violence plays in generating its economic and military dominance. For Kadri, the rate of commercial exploitation in the AW is greater than what he calls the super exploitation of sweatshops in EA. This is because, among other things, the AW is characterized by the intensification of commercial exploitation, higher profits, “newer manifestations of slavery, as in the act of denationalising/destroying peripheral formations” (p. 60).

Militarisation and war simply increases imperial power and crucially for Kadri, reduces the negotiating power of the working class. The Marxist labor theory of value shapes the ways in which the periphery has any room for maneuver. But this is not a simple notion that the North dominates the Third World (a refreshing use of this term that has been mostly replaced in the mainstream by the Global South) by superior mechanization and labor productivity. Instead, Kadri argues throughout, with immense analytical heft, that;

Prices [are] the mediated actuality of value via the balance of forces in the international class struggle and, within the class struggle as a production sphere itself, tally with the accumulated stock of imperialist power and camouflage real value by the degree of labours’ repression (p. 61).

In other words, there is a history to the ways in which value is generated and that context is crucial to unbundle in order to understand the dynamics of contemporary imperialism and why the world is ordered in the way that it is. On this latter point, Kadri makes an important contribution in seeking to understand the role of China in the world and especially in relation to the US. He offers a refreshing account of the rise of China, the transitions politically and economically since 1977 and the gang of five—he includes Mao in the populist notion of the Gang of 4—and the extent to which Beijing offers a sufficiently robust obstacle to Washington’s hegemony. After clearly indicating why and how China is certainly not an imperial power, concerned as it is with market power and not military conquest, he also notes the “obsequious strand in Chinese politics that stems from the rents of the cross-cutting relationship with the USA ... that caps the thrust of anti-capitalist propaganda” (p. 144).

This is a hard hitting critique of imperialism and the differential impact that it has in two regions of the world. It will be on my reading lists.

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This article was originally published on Wiley Online Library in February 2019.

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The Cordon Sanitaire: A Single Law Governing Development in East Asia and the Arab World

Author: Ali Kadri

Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan

ISBN: 978-981-10-4821-0

Pages: XVII, 170

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