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# Domination, Competition and Exploitation

## An Introduction to the Socialization of Capital (and How It Fails Us)

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> Capital shows itself more and more to be a social power, with the capitalist as its functionary – a power that no longer stands in any possible kind of relationship to what the work of one particular individual can create, but an alienated social power which has gained an autonomous position and confronts society as a thing, and as the power that the capitalist has through this thing.[1]
>
> –Karl Marx

> Capital is not an abstract category, it is a semiotic operator at the service of specific social formations. Its function is to record, balance, regulate and overcode the power formations inherent to developed industrial societies, power relations and the fluxes that make up the planet's overall economic powers.[2]
>
> –Félix Guattari

In his book on Marx – slyly subtitled *Adventures and Misadventures of a Critique* – Daniel Bensaïd writes about Marxism as a critical theory rather than an ideological doctrine. It is a theory of struggle and transformation (or revolution, if you will), granted, but not a prophesy, scientific orthodoxy, or even sociology. Bensaïd instead tries to posit a postmodern Marx, a set of critical tools that can be employed to analyze and criticize contemporary forms of capital. This means, then, that Marxist terms must be seen as open to interpretation and use (value), but also as taking part in a certain history – thus the adventures and misadventures. Seen in this light, the fall of the so-called communist regimes of the Soviet Bloc is not to be viewed as the end of the critical theory of Marx, but rather as a (new) beginning hereof, freed from hardened orthodoxy and the burden of Stalinism. According to Bensaïd, Marx's project consists of three fundamental critiques: that of historical reason, economic reason and scientific positivism. Three critiques, which complement each other in turn, and that are

> directly relevant to current questions about the end of history and the representation of time; about the relationship between class struggle and other types of conflict; about the destinies of hard sciences tormented by the uncertainties of the narrative sciences.[3]

It is in this line that the current publication is to be read: as an effort to engage in a critique of dominant narratives and assumptions. A critique that takes as its point of departure the notion of capital as its central idea, and indeed as a centralizing machinery in the current world system. It is an effort to state that if there is indeed such a thing as an empire, which is highly debatable, the advent of this empire is driven by a specific mechanism, a specific organizing and socializing principle: capital. As such, we have returned, albeit by way of a *différance*, to the

central and key notion of capital itself as the basis for our enquiry. But what exactly is capital?[4] As capital(ism) becomes increasingly essentialized and naturalized, it is tempting to see capital as a universal, or at least universalizing norm: To state that we all live under the conditions of capital, although that sounds both too obvious and too obtuse. Also, it seems antithetical to the theory of Capital to see it as universal, since the theory does not try to establish a universal history or theory thereof, but rather a theory of transformation, of possible change, counter-narratives and new hegemonies. Capital is, rather, what Cornelius Castoriadis would call an imaginary order, which does not mean that it does not have real effects, quite the contrary. It acts as a universalizing principle of measuring and (ac)counting, but it can, crucially, also be countered by other imaginaries. Capital is, then, a specific situation with specific histories and contingencies, but also with undeveloped potentialities, that can be directed towards its expansion as well as towards its demise.

The essays and projects presented in this book are all engaging in such critiques – of historical and economic determinism, and of scientific positivism – in establishing and challenging such dominant imaginaries. They try to analyze and visualize the contemporary conditions of capital, arguably very different from the conditions present when Marx wrote his theory of Capital. There is the evident change from industrialism to post-industrialism, although these modes of production are as much simultaneous as chronological, and as much geographical as they are temporal (as is the shift between Fordist and post-Fordist production).[5] The undeniable rise of immaterial labor does not only indicate a new relationship to the production of (surplus) value in the ways in which capital circulates through the body of the worker, but also in the ways that commodities manifest this

value. In the case of immaterial labor, we should perhaps talk of capital not only going through the body as in material labor, but also through the very soul (!) of the worker, while in the case of the commodity we can speak of a dematerialization of value: in either case we are speaking of an almost ghost-like presence. This then also requires new understandings of technologies, so central to the knowledge economy of post-Fordism. In writing about technology, Marx famously described the difference between a tool and a machine, with the former being an extension of the body and the latter an exploitation of the body. If this distinction is to be upheld, we will then need to discern between mental and bodily machines (and tools), and see how technical innovation in this area influences production in other sectors. According to Marx, machines alter the relations to nature (ecology), mental relations (the way we think, imagination), social relations (the way we act) as well as the reproduction of human life, and as such the machine, with its productivity, autonomization, exchangeability and measuring devices, is an apt image of capital itself. Here we can maintain a focus on the processes of capitalization and its effects, economically as well as subjectively. It is thus not merely the economic aspects of capital that must be followed, but also capitalization as a matrix for subjectivity and interpersonal, even intimate, relations.

The logic of capital itself, rather than a broad concept of capitalism as an economic system, is of course often overlooked, forgotten, hidden or taken for granted as naturalized in the current language game of politics with its focus on democracy, liberty and human rights. Current debates seem to indicate that there is no alternative to the market, to capital. We know this from the media, academia and social situations. A couple of examples: a relative of mine recently said that he believed in capitalism as the only system, since

communism and socialism had always failed; a former colleague of mine once stated that she would like to believe in socialism, but that she was afraid it was against human nature. But one could argue whether capitalism really is so successful, and if so, on what grounds? And is human existence not based as much on collaboration as on the survival of the fittest? In any case, these examples show how certain notions have become naturalized and essentialized, how deeply they have become internalized in the way we think, talk and feel. However, such ideas which regard capitalism as the only game in town can be questioned on a number of levels, since they conflate the market with capital – there were market economies before capitalism, of course – making this a highly dubious historical argument, that is not only essentialist, but that effectively presupposes an end to history, a possible equilibrium beyond conflict and indeed politics. But does our world really appear so stable and endless? Are there not conflicts between our daily lives and global capital? Are we not affected and placed in various struggles, from the upkeep of bare life to the attempts to live up to role models from advertising and popular culture? Indeed battle lines seem to exist not only between factors seen as external to capitalist/liberal democratic society, such as the increasing gap between rich and poor countries and the global ecological problems due to the endless expansion and industrialization of capital, unable to stop itself, but also internally, between who belongs to a workforce and who doesn't along with the increasing gap between images of desirability – independence, upward mobility, physical beauty, functioning family, etc. – and the ability to actually live them, both financially and psychologically.

The reproductive family, sexuality and childrearing, as well as notions of working as living, as identitarian, are among the battle lines being drawn by the commodification of everything, of all

aspects of human existence from bare life itself to the (apparent) multiple choices of life style. In *Numéro Deux*, a seminal film by Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Mieville from 1975 (which is exactly the time of the shift from Fordist to post-Fordist production in Western Europe), there is a crucial line which goes, "there was a landscape, and we put a factory in it." The film describes the difficulties of living under capitalistic conditions, specifically the impossibility of maintaining a bourgeois nuclear family under industrial living conditions, and shows the family as a factory. The film therefore concludes with the altered line: "There was a factory, and we built a landscape around it." It is the factory then, the machine of capital itself that produces our environment, not vice versa. We have naturalized a specific cultural construction, and it is one of the purposes of our project to de-naturalize our present: To show how capital fails us.

In this way capital(ism) does seem universal as a common denominator which is, naturally, also part of its effect as being the great calculator; measuring, translating and pricing everything and everyone. Capital acts doubly, on the one hand it is an equalizer: everything becomes the same in the sense that it can be exchanged, but on the other hand, everything becomes different through the exchange, through its exchange value, as it were. This is capital's universalist claim, its universalizing move. However universal capitalism acts or seems though, the universal is essentially empty or void, only to be filled with a particular content making claims for the universal, such as is the case with capitalism now.[6] So in order to understand how capital works as universalizing, it is crucial to study its particularities, its local as well as global workings and effects. Hence the focus on *location*, here particularized by double, but connected sites or economic, territorial organizations: the (post)welfare state (as exemplified by Norway) and the post-

communist country (as exemplified by Estonia), the two places where the exhibitionary interventions took place. But our exploration of the notion of capital must proceed along dual lines: on the one hand the aforementioned *locationality*, and on the other, *subjectivity* – how capitalism affects our daily lives, our very structure of feelings and perceptions: the machine is both mental and bodily. We shall focus on the current moment in history, with its structural changes, and, arguably, crisis, within global capital, and look at the two specific locations as models, as machinery within the production and proliferation of capital. Partly, the Western European model of the welfare state is undergoing a massive structural change, if not deconstruction. This can also be seen in the refined variation of the welfare state, the Nordic social democratic model of redistribution and equilibrium; a compromise between liberalism and socialism, but also a temporal territorial alliance between capital and labor that is now historical. In other words, capital must be localized and historicized, as suggested by Immanuel Wallerstein with his notion of 'historical capitalism'. This is also the case on the margins of the new Europe, with the rapid and massive deregulation of the post-communist countries, where the former state capitalism (as a mode of production as much as an 'official' ideological state formation: "communism equals socialism plus electricity"[7]) is being transformed into a neoliberal, transnational market system. But how do these formations, or variations, affect each other? What are the routes between them and are they tending towards merger or secession? As borders get reconfigured, new battle lines are drawn around notions of territory and alliances, no longer maintained between exploited and exploiters, but rather among the exploited themselves: those with work and those without, those with papers and those without. It's the effects of global capitalism, rather than its principle, that such a historical belief in the nation-state attests

to; that the nation-state will somehow save us from globalism (as the key word replacing capitalism). Unfortunately, trade unions and left-wing parties in most of the former welfare states subscribe to this historical model of nation and production, that was part and parcel of the rise of capitalism, and has since been left behind by capital in its later, current stages: When will it be left behind by the (historical) left?

The project is, then, to discuss these specific models of capital and (cultural) production and how we can visualize the current changes. These essays and projects take their point of departure in these specific models of (re)production and (re)distribution, and look at how production is changing in the Western countries, mainly from industrial production to immaterial labor, and in the East from state capitalism to a deregulated (post)industrialism with a new commodification and codification of the labor force, and thus of all social as well as economic relations. What are 'new' economies, and what kinds of technologies of the self are they producing, and indeed, enforcing? Thus, in these pages you will find efforts to review the situation, asking what is to be done in this predicament of expansive global capitalism, corporatization of culture, the specularization of politics, and the marginalization, even criminalization, of the critical left. Discussions range from the spectral form of value, (self)-precarization, deregulation and the privatization of the welfare state to the development of alternative economies and the establishment of various modes of critique and resistance, cartography and historiography, inclination and inquiry, and the politicization of subject positions.

We shall aim to understand the notion of capital, then, as an economic tool, as a measure of exchange and surplus, and as something at once regulated and regulating (by both State and market), as well as a producer of subjectivity (a.k.a. the

commodification of everything), but also as a power tool, a force-relation. In an essay called 'Capital as the Integral of Power Relations', the late Felix Guattari provocatively states that capital is primarily about power and only secondarily about profit (and thus, perhaps, touches upon notions of biopower and governmentality). Guattari's text not only points to the changes from the national organization to global capitalism, but also modifies Marx's theories in turn, especially in a reconfiguration of the composition of value. Secondly, Guattari focuses on this change in terms of a 'semiotization' of capital. This notion is crucial for two reasons: firstly
in terms of articulation, since the grander motivation behind *Capital (It Fails Us Now)*, is to ask how to go about articulating a contemporary description of capital, which may or may not follow some of the routes pointed out by Guattari *and* how to articulate and imagine a non-capitalistic subjectivity. Guattari obviously takes his cue from the theories of Lacan here, turning his famous idea of the subconscious being structured like a language onto the logic of capital, its expansions and subjectivizations, and claiming that capital is (like) a language. Accounting, measuring and the stock exchange are all linguistic effects, as is the automatization and machinic assemblage of the production and labor process. This notion of semiotization is also a way of describing labor becoming immaterial (and the subsequent dematerialization of value):

> Automatized and computerized production no longer draws its consistency from basic human factors, but from a machinic phylum which traverses, bypasses, disperses, miniaturizes, and co-opts all human activities.[8]

As in the machinic understanding of capital in Marx, technical innovation, including new technologies, is more of a disciplining and alienation of the body and the subject than an aid to it. In

other words, the dematerialization of labor and its computerized techniques, as well as its inherent reorganization of leisure and labor time, is not to be considered an emancipation of the working subject and its creativity, but rather as the total co-optation hereof by the machinery of capital.

Guattari's linguistic turn brings about metaphors of grammar and structure, obviously, but perhaps also notions of counter-narrative, incoherent speech, gibberish, lying and *détournement*. And maybe even silence, muting. That is, in the usage of language also lies resistance.[9] Perhaps this was what Michel Foucault was aiming at in his otherwise strangely ambivalent and non-committal preface to another of Guattari's works, *Anti-Oedipus* (co-written with Gilles Deleuze). Foucault famously called the book an introduction and even manual to the "Nonfascist Life."[10] What Foucault was aiming at, was not the historical political formation of fascism, but rather the contemporaneous fascism in our heads. This was something that should be achieved via everyday practice; an ethics and politics of the everyday, but we shall also try to imagine models for a post- or anti-commodified subject position. If Michel Foucault could write about the 'nonfascist life', can we imagine the non-capitalist subject? And what will this entail in terms of economic and social relations living within capitalism? If capital, as was the case with fascism, is in our heads, that is as processes of subjectivization and subjugation, something possessing our very souls, we should perhaps speak more of exorcism than exodus as a political strategy...

A slightly different way of thinking capital as a technology, now that desiring-machines (as posited by Guattari) have to a large extent been smoothly incorporated into global capital, has recently been supplied by Ray Brassier. Writing on Alain Badiou's mathematical ontology, Brassier sees capital as nothing more and

nothing less than a huge (accounting) machine, what he calls "... an automated axiomatic system."[11] Brassier sees capital as a machine that can think, fuelled by the very instability and randomness of numbers, rather than countered by it the way Deleuze and Guattari hoped:

> Far from being threatened by its 'contradiction', capitalism thrives on them. It is an open system, an aleatory axiomatic, continually redefining its own structural boundaries, perpetually living off its own impossible limit.[12]

It is thus *not* a determinate, but rather an indeterminate, logic: capital is both the real and the void, and in this sense even the theory that is 'Capital' fails us. Could this then also indicate that refusing to be counted – to stand up and be counted, as it were – is a possible resistance strategy? This would also mean that the right to work should be changed to the right not to work, not to be counted, stamped, filed, briefed and indexed; that we begin to detach from the notion of work – material or immaterial – as the foundation for (political) identity, and begin to lead truly *unproductive* lives.

*This essay is the introduction of the book "Capital (It Fails Us Now)" http://transform.eipcp.net/publications/projects/capital, edited by Simon Sheikh in the framework of the transform-project "Capital" http://transform.eipcp.net/Actions/exhibitions/capital.*

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[1] Karl Marx, Capital, vol. 3, London: Penguin/Hammondsworth, 1981, 373.

[2] Félix Guattari, 'Capital as the Integral of Power Formations', in *Soft Subversions*, New York: Semiotext(e), 1996, 202.

[3] Daniel Bensaïd, *Marx for Our Times: Adventures and Misadventures of a Critique*, London: Verso, 2002, 3.

[4] Marx never actually used the term capitalism, but only capital, understood as an economic and social relation of domination, competition and exploitation, rather than as an ideology proper.

[5] Here it might be useful to refer to Paolo Virno's definition of post-Fordism not as a general shift from material to immaterial labor, but rather as a reorganization of all parts of the production and labor process, that is, as a shift in the relation between the worker and work: "By post-Fordism, I mean instead a set of characteristics that are related to the *entire* contemporary workforce, including fruit pickers and the poorest of immigrants. Here are some of them: the ability to react in a timely manner to the continual innovations in techniques and organizatorial models, a remarkable 'opportunism' in negotiating among the different possibilities offered by the job market, familiarity with what is possible and unforseeable, that minimal entrepreneurial attitude that makes it possible to decide what is the 'right thing' to do within a nonlinear productive fluctuation, a certain familiarity with the web of communications and information. As one can see, these are generically human gifts, not the result of 'specialization'. What I hold true is that post-Fordism mobilizes all the faculties that characterize our species: language, abstract thinking, disposition toward learning, plasticity, the habit of not having solid habits." Interview with Paolo Virno by Branden W. Joseph in *Grey Room* 21, Fall 2005, 29.

[6] I am here referring to Ernesto Laclau's work on the category of the universal within political representation and identification. See, for instance, 'Universalism, Particularism and the Question of Identity' in Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipations*, London: Verso, 1996, 20-35, as well as his dialogue with Judith Butler and Slavoj Zizek in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Zizek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universalism*, London: Verso, 2000.

[7] Commonly attributed to V.I. Lenin, this much quoted phrase is apparently incorrect. The proper quote should read: "Communism is the Power of Soviets plus the electrification of the whole country!" which is slightly more ambiguous and even sinister... I thank Dmitry Vilensky for bringing this to my attention.

[8] Guattari, op.cit., 207.

[9] This all begs the question, is language the only game in town? And what is the relation between language games and capital as the integral of power relations? And is language then the site for revolutions rather than the body as Guattari suggests (and as Foucault perhaps suggested in his late works, i.e. 'History of Sexuality')? Is it in the language that we use, as in when we are interpellated by juridico-economic language from state institutions, but also when we respond and react in it? (Not only to these very institutions, but in everyday language. It has, recently, struck how exactly a juridico-economic language is employed by individuals at times of breakdown in, say, friendships, where a sudden turn to such a language capitalizes the relation somehow.) Will the non-capitalistic subjectivity then be achieved through a language of desire, through something non-codifiable? And, given the commodification of everything, how to deal with the problem of

co-optation and the state-form as giving and removing rights (to articulation and participation)?

[10] Michel Foucault, 'Preface to *Anti-Oedipus*' (1976), reprinted in *Power, The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, Volume 3, New York: The New Press, 2000, 106-110.

[11] Ray Brassier, 'Nihil Unbound: Remarks on Subtractive Ontology and Thinking Capitalism', in Peter Hallward (Ed.), *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, London/New York: Continuum, 2004, 52.

[12] Ibid.