General

Anti-Humanism and the Humanities in the Era of Capitalist Realism

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This text is based on a lecture given at the University of Groningen within the conference *Arts and Humanities: Of(f) Course*. The conference was addressing the fact that both the arts and the humanities have lost their self-evidence in a world where 'bottom line' economic standards are becoming increasingly dominant.

What I have called capitalist realism can be defined as the belief that capitalism is the only viable ("realistic") political economic system. Yet this is in a way too grand a way of construing what is at stake in capitalist realism, which is not so much a specific belief as a pervasive ideological field. Capitalist realism is usually seen, not in statements about political possibilities, but in the behaviour and expectations displayed in the workplace: such as a certain kind of compliance and resignation, in the acceptance that pay and working conditions will only worsen, and in the failure to fight against the introduction of new supervisory or regulatory systems. Underlying and justifying all this behaviour is a sense of inevitability regarding the triumph of neoliberal logic, and, concomitantly, a sense that organised working-class politics are defeated and obsolete. Whether we like it or not, capitalist realism insists that this is the way the world is now.

Capitalist realism *[strikemag.org - Read Fisher's update on capitalist realism on Strike!]* has its origins in the simultaneous emergence of post-Fordism and neoliberalism at the end of the 1970s. Neoliberal strategies enabled capital to seize control of the new terrain opened up by the disintegration of Fordism. There was a strong fit between neoliberalism's rhetoric of choice and autonomy and the flexibility of post-Fordist conditions. By contrast, the strategies and language of the (old) left had little purchase on this new world of globalisation, computerisation and casualisation. The left not only failed to renew itself as commentators, such as Wendy Brown observed, it actually became backward-looking and defensive. Instead of seeking to bring about an unprecedented future, much of the the left in the UK became resigned to defending aspects of the status quo. Social democracy, once dismissed by the radical left as a pallid compromise, was posited in retrospect as the most hopeful situation. Unable to modernise, the UK left in general found itself manoeuvred into a corner, where the choice was between obsolescence and auto-abolition. In the UK, New Labour pioneered the latter course. The arrival of New Labour in the 1990s was the moment when capitalist realism was definitively installed as the ruling social logic.

In the 1980s, capital advanced by means of a "carrot and stick" method aggressively defeating workers in labour disputes at the same time as it offset the real-term stagnation and decline of wages with credit. The new desiring-terrain of consumer goods seduced workers out of class consciousness, while anti-union legislation dissolved solidarity. The left became identified with a centralising bureaucratic apparatus that was incessantly depicted as both out of date and inefficient. In an attempt to distance itself from this "old Left", Blair's Labour Party accepted most of the neoliberal programme, and confined its progressive ambitions to smuggling a smattering of social justice into a world that it now

conceded would be dominated by capital. Capitalist realism was now consolidated. Capitalist realism isn't about the acceptance of neoliberalism as such – it is rather about accepting neoliberalism as the dominant force in the world: "We might not like it, but there's no alternative..." Meanwhile, the radical left lost any conviction that it could build a new world, and instead dedicated itself to "resisting" capitalism. But this resistance has caused capital no serious problems.

The most serious problem for capital was generated not by its opponents, but by its own internal logic. The 2008 credit crisis seemed for a moment to herald the end of neoliberalism. The consequent proliferation of militancy in 2010 and 2011 led some – including the BBC's Economics Editor Paul Mason – to declare the end of capitalist realism. [1]

Yet, it is has not turned out that way. The ease with which governments were able to impose austerity programmes after 2008 is a testament to the continuing power of capitalist realism – at least in countries like the UK. What we have seen is yet another round of what Naomi Klein calls the "shock doctrine". Klein famously argues that "disaster capitalism" succeeded by taking advantage of crisis situations. The audacity of capital's response to the 2008 situation can be grasped when we remember the obvious fact that this crisis was generated by capitalism – and more specifically neoliberalism – itself. The solution to the crisis caused by neoliberal policies was an intensified form of neoliberalism. After 2008, capitalist realism certainly changed form. Before 2008, capitalist realism had a bullying, triumphalist tone ("join us or die"); since 2008, it has adopted a more desperate quality ("if we don't all pull together, everything will collapse"). If anything, the rhetoric of "realism" has intensified since 2008. The (largely successful) gambit has aimed to shift the blame from finance capital onto the vestigial spending commitments of social democracy. We are now informed that, in our current straitened circumstances, such spending is no longer "realistic".

Such is the current (embattled) context in which the humanities find themselves. The success of capitalist realism brought with it the triumph of business ontology or the idea that all culture is measured in terms of the metrics of business. Under business ontology, the humanities are depicted as a decadent luxury. Business studies and economics emerge as the master disciplines, while the humanities are increasingly pegged as, at best, a distraction, and at worst, a parasitic drain on resources. This discourse now functions as a defence of cuts in the arts and culture in general. The attack on the humanities must be seen in strategic as well as purely economic terms – after the collapse of the Soviet bloc and the subduing of trade unions, the humanities and the arts have become a – if not the last – refuge of the left. Yet, if the humanities have become the new refuge of the left, some of the most important leftist theory since the 1960s has not shown any compunction about biting the hand that feeds it. Ironically, some of the most important work in (or at the edge of) the humanities has been avowedly anti-humanistic, and, as such, it has questioned, if not outright undermined, the very legitimacy of the humanities itself. This leftist attack on the humanities has concentrated on three key areas:

- the rejection of essentialism (including the idea that there is a privileged human essence).
- the deprivileging of lived experience (which becomes not the site of authenticity, but the terrain in which ideology and discourse are disseminated and practiced).
- the reformulating of agency (in the context of a dismissal of the self-present, conscious subject).

Theorists as varied as Althusser, Foucault, Haraway, Laclau and Mouffe, as well as, more recent thinkers such as Ray Brassier (who draws in part on the neurophilosophy of Thomas Metzinger) have all challenged the humanities. What is at stake in all these attacks is an

undermining of the figure around which the humanities had traditionally been organised – the sovereign human individual. In terms that Ray Brassier derives from the philosopher, Wilfred Sellars, this theory forces us to confront the distinction between two images of humanity – the manifest image (how humans appear to themselves in their phenomenological self-presentations) and the scientific image (science's account of human existence).

What does this left wing, theoretical anti-humanism have to contribute to the current struggle against capitalist realism? Might not such a theoretical approach actually assist the anti-humanities agenda of the right? Not at all because the right's scepticism about the humanities comes alongside a practical humanism, a continued commitment to the idea of the self-constructing individual who possesses something called "will" and "responsibility". As Deleuze and Guattari argue in Anti-Oedipus, capitalism is based on simultaneous processes of deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation. On the one hand, capital destroys all existing certainties, treating the world (and all social conventions, beliefs, and rituals) as infinitely capable of Promethean re-invention; on the other hand, it remains pragmatically and opportunistically attached to archaic formations (traditions, habits, and philosophical models).

Capitalism is thus characterised by the tension between the abstract and inhuman machineries of finance and the all-too-human figure of the "Oedipalised" individual, the solitary, self-determining monad. As Deleuze and Guattari understand it, the solitary individual is a kind of simulation that capitalism cannot do without. Much of the power and relevance of Deleuze and Guattari's analyses arises from this conception of capitalism, which has been borne out by the neoliberal revolution. At the same time, as neoliberalism has allowed the power of finance capital to increase, it has insisted upon the primacy of the choosing individual. Neoliberal ideology has been based on responsibilisation: the obfuscation of systemic processes in favour of so-called individual responsibility.

One contribution of leftist anti-humanism has been the rejection of this model of human agency – a model, which the radical psychotherapist David Smail calls "magical voluntarism". According to Smail, traditional psychology "has become lost in a magical realm, which in fact has no chance of impacting upon the real world of material space-time. Thus, what we take to be 'psychology' in this respect hypostasises an immaterial world based on linguistic constructions, inevitably giving rise to a mythology of magical voluntarism that is, though highly plausible, doomed to impotence." [2]

These "linguistic constructions" are, of course, nothing less than ideology, and the self-understanding they engender is part of the experience of subjectivity that, for Althusser, was famously at the core of ideology. The continuing importance of Althusser's theses on ideology reminds us that ideology isn't just a set of false ideas that are imposed on people: rather, the form of subjectivity itself, the very way that we experience the world, is, as it were, "spontaneously" ideological – ideology is only ideology when it appears as an "obviousness". (Althusser's work offers another take on the opposition between the manifest and the scientific image: the manifest image is ideology, and the only escape from ideology is through science. Yet, as Althusser explains it, we live in ideology – which isn't to make the patently false claim that ideology doesn't change; it is, however, to say that, as living, experiencing individuals, we can only ever be the subject of one ideology or another. Only science – i. e., theory, or the analysis of ideology – lies outside ideology.[3]

What Smail calls "magical voluntarism" is not confined to psychology or psychotherapy; rather, they are psychotherapeutic ideas with the capacity for autonomous self-reinvention that have spread far beyond therapy into mass-mediated conceptions of subjectivity. However, it's worth dwelling for a while on the implications of all this with regard to the politics of mental health because it's no accident that the rise of capitalist realism has

coincided with the decline of anti-psychiatry. Anti-psychiatry was probably the movement in which the theoretical anti-humanism of Althusser, Foucault, Deleuze-Guattari and others was most focused on practical political goals.

Capitalist realism has seen the re-naturalisation and renormalisation of psychiatry, which, alongside the dominant forms of psychotherapy, has depoliticised mental illness. Stress has become privatised, and is rooted either in brain chemistry (according to the dominant schools of psychiatry), or in family history and personal attitudes (according to the most popular forms of psychotherapy). If stress has private causes, then it is no use seeking political solutions.

It's no surprise, then, to find that incidences of depression have reached epidemic proportions under capitalist realism. As Franco Berardi has argued, the management of depression has become a science of social control. If people are cripplingly depressed, they will be unable to work (especially in the increasing number of jobs that require affective labour) ; but if they are too self-possessed and confident, they may rebel. The task, then, is to achieve just the right amount of depression, which leaves individuals not too disaffected that they cease to function, but remain too stressed to contemplate revolt.[4]

As Smail argues, it is in mental distress that we confront the aporias of the ideology of individual self-realisation. "What people who suffer psychological distress tend to become aware of," Smail argues, "is that no matter how much they want to change, no matter how hard they try, no matter what mental gymnastics they put themselves through, their experiences of life stay much the same. This is because there is no such thing as an autonomous individual. What powers we have are acquired from and distributed within our social context, some of them (the most powerful) at unreachable distances from us. The very meaning of our actions is not something that we can autonomously determine, but is made intelligible (or otherwise) by orders of culture (proximal as well as distal) over which we have virtually no control."[5] From this, it should be clear that rejecting voluntarism does not surrender us to determinism. On the contrary, the rejection of individual voluntarism is a precondition of the (re) discovery of agency. Despite what capital claims, we can't "just do it". This brings us to the most chilling aspects of our current global situation.

The closest thing we currently have to an agent controlling things is the automatism of capital – an automatism that requires the collusion of large numbers of human beings, but which is not reducible to an aggregation of individual human wills. As the 2008 financial crisis, and more ominously, the looming threat of climate change show, it is not that there is a group of humans in charge who are simply choosing not to act but that there is no form of agency that yet exists that is capable of meaningful action. But this should be treated as a challenge rather than as a cause for despair. The agency in question is one that must be invented by theoretical and practical work. It doesn't exist in a readymade form.

But theoretical anti-humanism's major commitments are a prerequisite for any reconstruction of agency. The rejection of experience as a privileged site awakens us to the (omni) presence of ideology. The critique of essentialism (there is no fixed way that social systems must be organised; there is no natural human essence) denaturalises relations, behaviour and beliefs that would otherwise be taken for granted. This is the decisive import, for instance, of Foucault's histories of madness, sexuality and discipline. Foucault's work converted taken-for-granted categories and institutional assumptions into contingent machineries that were assembled for particular purposes at particular times – with the implication that, if they could be assembled, they could also be dismantled. This kind of intuition – that there is no inevitability to social systems, that hegemony is constructed from arbitrary "chains of articulation", chains whose contingency means that they can be taken apart and rebuilt – has also been at the core of Stuart Hall's work. Yet, without a

programme for the production of the new, these critical gestures will just be so much background noise to the continuing domination of capital. It is not enough to expose the arbitrariness and constructedness of currently dominant (cognitive, social, and epistemological) categories, we must also think and act beyond them. This is the other crucial contribution that theoretical anti-humanism can make: it can incite us to engage in acts of theoretical imagination that will break the distorting mirror of capitalist-humanist ideology.

One reason that the destruction of capital is not simply a matter of will is that it involves the supersession of certain cognitive categories, which organise the way we experience the world. Michael Hardt has rightly argued that "the positive content of communism, which corresponds to the abolition of private property, is the autonomous production of humanity – a new seeing, a new hearing, a new thinking, a new loving". [6] The abolition of private property entails a self-reinforcing circuit of theory and practice. Private property is both a set of social relations and a cognitive construction, and both must be eliminated. As Hardt's remark makes clear, the task is a cultural one as much as it can be confined to politics in the standard sense – for what is a new seeing, a new hearing, if not a new kind of culture? Perhaps it is in this respect – the challenge of imagining the new – that leftist thought is now most lacking. As we saw earlier, it is the forces of capital that have more quickly adapted to what Stuart Hall and others once called "new times" than the left. The failure of social imagination is no doubt a consequence of capitalist realism, which makes it impossible to even conceive of an alternative to capitalism. But, by the same token, the overcoming of capitalist realism cannot happen without the reinvention of social imagination. A backward-looking left is not capable of imagining a different future, even less so can it take steps to engineer it into existence; this left can only incompetently defend a past that has already disappeared.

We've long since given up the idea that the future is already built, and that the locomotive of history will inevitably take us to it. We must now accept that the future must be built – not ex nihilo, but beginning with the materials at hand. What are those materials? Let's consider only a few examples: File sharing and peer-to-peer networks have already brought certain forms of private property into crisis. As Hardt and Negri convincingly argue, networked capitalism depends on forms of cooperation that are antithetical to the individualist ethos of neoliberalism.

Meanwhile, neurological experimentation means that what Foucault called "the production of man by man" has now become a possibility in the most literal sense. Nothing is fixed, everything is up for grabs. Can a revived theoretical anti-humanism give the left the courage it needs to once again embrace the strange and the unprecedented?

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Footnotes

1. See: www.guardian.co.uk.
2. Smail, David, *Power, Interest and Psychology: Elements of a Social Materialist Understanding of Distress* (PCCS books, 2005), 27–28.
3. See "Althusser's Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)" in: *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, (Monthly Review Press, 1971)
4. Berardi, Franco, *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-alpha Generation* (Minor Compositions, 2009).
5. Smail, David, *Power, Interest and Psychology: Elements of a Social Materialist Understanding of Distress* (PCCS books, 2005), 46.
6. "The Common in Communism", in: Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (eds.), *The Idea of Communism* (Verso, 2010), 141.

Tags

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