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Capital

Mercedes Bunz

Capital is a term whose meaning one cannot catch. Several words and **worlds** unfold it in inconsistent directions. One thing, however, is certain: It is currently the term ruling the present discourse, rather lonesomely, ever since economy has taken over the place once reserved for politics, which it had stolen before from religion. That there is a link between politics and religion was noticed by Walter Benjamin, who wrote “one can behold in capitalism a religion” warning that its universalism affects the position of critique: “We cannot draw close the net in which we stand” (1921, 259). Today, capitalism’s universalism seems to be stronger than ever, leaving no outside to flee to. Capital has successfully infected areas formerly addressed as autonomous, such as education and the idea of the university, but also science, culture, or art. In other words, it has successfully positioned itself as the sovereign ruler of our contemporary discourse. What else can we do but to stare at capital’s powerful ruling insignia – “measurement” and “efficiency” – as if we were conservative Catholics enveloped by an unfurling enlightenment? Where is our imagination? It is needed in a time in which one cannot see an end to capitalism, although it had a beginning: Following Marx, theorists from Rosa Luxemburg (1913) to David Harvey (2014) have treated capital as a historical phenomenon starting when stable property was converted into fluid wealth invested to bring gain.

32 Unfortunately, it seems to have become more fluid and more universal ever since. The hope of facing capital as a historical phenomenon with an end in sight seems to be gone. But never mind. The present is a formidable place to escape our gloomy future.

Theorists have taken up the challenge of a sovereign capitalism with new answers, for example, to question the role of human agency (Parisi 2004; Noys 2011; Žižek 2014). Furthermore, historical reasons (the end of actually existing socialism) as well as contemporary reasons (that the actual crisis of existing capitalism has no crucial effect on capital) gave rise to discontent regarding once powerful political ideas like communism and communization (Noys 2011). The fact that capitalism is continuously appropriating alternative approaches has led to a call for a radical non-relation: “The new mantra is: *we have no demands*. We don’t want political representation. We don’t want collective bargaining. We don’t want a seat at the table” (Galloway 2011, 244). An elegant suicidal gesture that needs to be thought through further.

The effect of having no demand is withdrawing. To withdraw, however, also means that the “we” is not turning somewhere else affirmatively. As such, withdrawing replaces opposition with a non-relation, which causes the dispersion of one’s own collective force. In being withdrawn, there will be no “we” anymore. Our highly individualized time (which with hindsight could be called “the era of the individual”) seems anyway to have a weakening effect on critique. Withdrawing from a collective force means to leave a tool of critique even further behind. For when we **work** together to become someone else (a force we can call upon each time we turn up music and dance, or write texts, build organizations or houses or computer programs, are with friends, live a relationship, or simply: speak) we question the capitalist idea that a collective is nothing more than the sum of individual, exchangeable people. Using a collective force means unlocking capitals of critique that do not reply to capitalism.

Capitalism, however, has replied – and successfully appropriated its other. The environmental protests of the 1970s and 1980s, which accused companies of exploiting Planet Earth in addition to workers, have been turned into the concept of the organic supermarket and the fair-trade brand to allow a healthy consumption for the better-off. Although capitalism presents itself with a friendly face – as if it could be a dialectical unity of itself and of its other – it is not. Starbucks might sell fair-trade coffee and “Ethos” water with the claim of “helping children to get clean water,” but its water, to illustrate the general problem with one example, is continuously involved in scandals: Despite an exceptional drought in California, Starbucks has used a water supplier located in drought territory; the bottles did not contain recycled **plastic**; and only five cents of the retail price (\$1.95) is given to the charity. A bit of googling quickly shows that the water’s social wrapping is primarily a commercial for a for-profit organization.

Here, it becomes apparent that capital – always full of contradictions – managed to assimilate the position of its opponents while still operating capitalistically. This trick has created a paradox reality, which weakens capital’s political opponents as much as it challenges the concept of political thinking. For what becomes of resistance when resistance just gets appropriated by capitalism? An urgent question. Although one could also ask a very different and in no sense a less urgent one: Might it be the case that to render resistance as “useless” means playing into the hands of capital? Irritated by this, one must move. “Think we must!” (Woolf 2006, 62). In order to enter this problem from a different perspective that makes resistance distinguishable and allows one to be anti-capitalistic, one could face contemporary capitalism informed by Karen Barad’s method of diffraction, for example. So what is her take on diffraction?

As a conceptual approach, diffraction avoids focusing on essential otherness and oppositions to involve reading insights through one another, a process Barad (2007) has turned into an inspiring method. In the humanities so far mostly recognized as

34 a reading method (for example Kaiser 2014, Tuin 2011), Barad also indicates that one could understand diffraction patterns in a far broader sense as “the fundamental constituents that make up the world” (2007, 72). Applying the method of diffraction when exploring the problem of contemporary capitalism resonates in so far as one faces two moments, which at first sight seem to be indistinguishable: like Starbucks pretending to be a charity, the physical phenomenon of diffraction is based on the interference of waves being interwoven with each other. However, although the different elements are intra-acting, not everything has become just the same. Here, Barad demands attention to the details: “fine-grained details matter” (90). Turning to these details shows that five cents of the water bottle are devoted to social engagement, while the rest is following capitalistic interests of making the most profit. The look of resistance has been appropriated, but this should not be mixed up with resistance itself. When studying the material closely, differences emerge, because “details of diffraction patterns depend on the details of the apparatus” (91).

In other words, the political meaning of resistance always evolves from and with a concrete set-up. With this, it becomes the task of critique to turn to the fine details. It is the fine details that give a glimpse of today’s paradoxical reality, which finds capitalism assimilating the position of its opponents, interweaving formerly antagonistic positions that no longer seem to be oppositional. But only at first sight does this appear to produce the problem Benjamin described when saying “one can not draw close the net in which we stand” (1921, 259). A dialectical tension is still there: withstanding capitalism is not capitalism, although it cannot be rigidly coupled anymore to something (there is no political essence, even not an anti-capitalistic one). In the post-dialectical setting of today, oppositional relations are given, but they don’t operate anymore in an antagonistic mode. Instead, they function as the flipside of each other: “/” instead of “vs.” Which (flip-)side

someone or something is on depends on the details: on the apparatus used, the setting, the waves.

In fact, the force of capital itself has a flipside, since there is a small but crucial difference between capital and capitalistic interests. While “capitalist” and “capitalism” describe the exploiting principle of making profit, an inconsistent term like “capital” is not necessarily capitalistic – which is why we could, for example, take part in a seminar about the “Capital(s) of Critique.”¹ Capital is, however, necessarily imaginative and surprising – a productive force that is always creating new space. Being new, it is open to be used in order to make the evidence of a different world appear. Or as Benjamin would say: “Someone is sure to be found who needs this force without making profit from it” (1931, 541).

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1 The seminar took place at the annual meeting of the American Comparative Literature Organization 2014 at NYU and was chaired by Kathrin Thiele and Birgit Mara Kaiser. For Marx and Engels, capital is first of all a force of transformation, and as such it can unify contradictory aspects. This is why the bourgeoisie has had “a most revolutionary part” (Marx and Engels 1848, 15), while not being a revolutionary class.

- 36 Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. (1848) 2010. "Manifesto of the Communist Party." Marxists Internet Archive. Accessed April 18, 2016. <http://marxists.org/>.
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