

The Capitalistic Mentality and the Politics of Radical Reform

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Periodization of the various versions of capitalism is tough academic work, and what follows is not meant to diminish the importance of those kinds of projects.

However, this essay argues that when we focus our energies on the specific adaptations of capitalism we can develop a tendency to miss the forest for the trees. That is, when we focus on what is unique about specific periods of capitalism, we can overlook what has remained constant throughout the various periods of capitalism—what makes capitalism, capitalism. We should instead, I suggest, focus on both the forest *and* the trees in order to develop and take advantage of the specific contradictions and resources produced during a specific period that can be utilized for radical change—radical change aimed at moving us beyond the current system entirely.

In “The Rise of the Servant Society,” Michael J. Thompson’s otherwise impressive and original piece published in the Winter 2016 issue of *New Politics*, he argues that whatever we want to call this most recent period of capitalism, it is one characterized by the predominance of the servant. By this Thompson means two things: First, “that new forms of labor in advanced post-industrial society, as well as new pressures for consumption, are leading to new forms of service labor that are increasingly directed by and toward the needs of the wealthy. Second, and as a consequence of the new pressures for consumption, a new kind of culture and consciousness is emerging that is increasingly docile in political terms” (27). He then asserts that it is “the legitimacy of the basis of the system” that is unique to the contemporary period (27). Thompson concludes by criticizing the post-work perspective of some recent left scholarship, instead suggesting that a redemocratized conception of labor and wealth is a more realistic response to the peculiarity of the servant society.

Theorizing the Capitalistic Mentality

While I will not argue that Thompson’s claim about the emergence of the servant society and the servant mentality is an inaccurate characterization of the current state of affairs, I do want to show that the servant mentality is actually an evolution of a deeper, more fundamental capitalistic mentality that transcends the various periods of capitalism and is itself rooted in the capitalist mode of production. This mentality—representing the generalizable psycho-social characteristics that correspond to a particular social system, in this case capitalism—has a number of characteristics, including alienation, predominance of the profit-motive and the drive for accumulation, commodity fetishism including the commodification of persons (through labor and otherwise), possessiveness, the pervasive inability to see exploitative wage labor as anything other than freely contracted employment (the identification of exploitation with freedom), the increasing identification of quality with quantity, and the corollary dominance of an instrumentalized rationality at the expense of critical self-reflection and social criticism. Most destructive though is the normalization of

hypercompetitiveness (and the resultant castigation of genuine cooperation and solidarity). All of the elements of the capitalistic mentality, of which there are probably others I have not listed here, are tied to the hyperindividualization of the capitalist subject.

These are aspects of capitalist society that mostly were initially theorized by Marx himself in the nineteenth century, mostly in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, but many are maintained up through *Capital: Volume 1*. They were expanded upon by Western Marxists and the Frankfurt School thinkers in the early and mid-twentieth century.

Capitalism has always included these psycho-social elements because they are not only produced by this particular mode of production, but have been exacerbated by the ruling classes to maintain this system. Competitive labor markets and mass production technologies alienate workers from their potentially creative labor and their fellow workers. Workers begin to perceive themselves and their labor (the central component of their species-being or human nature) as commodities to be bought and sold. Humanity is dehumanized through the process of the commodification of life experience. Eventually the goal of “success” becomes identical to accumulating things and wealth, not humane experiences of creativity, spontaneity, and cooperative solidarity.

What is new about the kind of consumption that Thompson describes? Thompson presents little evidence for the idea that things have significantly changed in recent years. As described in works from Marx to Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) up through the first-generation Frankfurt School, it seems that this pressure for consumption has been present since the early development and spread of capitalism and has increased fairly consistently over the past two centuries. The pressures seem to be qualitatively similar across time, though varying in intensity. Furthermore, what is new about labor being directed by and toward the needs of the wealthy? Thompson tells us what is new about the form, but he doesn’t connect it to what is old about this process. It is this short-shrifting of what has not changed within the period of post-industrial capitalism that causes Thompson to miss the forest for the trees in both his diagnosis of the servant society and, more problematically, the left politics appropriate to countering it.

Thompson argues that the rise of the servant society coincides with a new form of social power founded on the idea of “oligarchic wealth” (29). Oligarchic wealth is a social power “that grants individuals power over the labor of others and the power to control and direct that labor toward their own ends and interests. But it is also a kind of wealth that allows elites to use resources that could otherwise be employed for common goods” (29). He argues that a shift toward a democratic concept of wealth (“democratic wealth”) is the inverse of this emergent oligarchic social power and would deploy resources toward common purposes and projects. Again, I want to ask, how is this oligarchic conception of wealth new? This seems to be the kind of social power that has been present since capitalism became the dominant socio-economic system of the world. Capitalism has always—perhaps with a few exceptions like the emergence of the social welfare state in the West after World War II—guided labor and resources toward the goals and interests of the wealthy.

Thompson concludes by arguing, “The material agent of social change is therefore not made through the *nature of work*, but through the *nature of demands*. Without a shattering of the basic alienation that constitutes what I have called here the culture and mentality of the servant society, no viable radical political agency can be restored to working people” (32).

While he is certainly right to emphasize demands as well as the nature of work, it seems theoretically unclear why demands matter *to the exclusion of* the nature of work. Both seem to matter. Additionally, there is a third, broader dimension I would add to these two foundations of a potentially radical consciousness, and that is the nature of how people spend their time when they aren’t working (including “free-time” and the quality and quantity of time spent consuming),¹ which

would allow for the wider inclusion of the psychological problems produced by a consumeristic capitalist society. Thompson is simply thinking too small when he situates the potential for radical change in the shattering of the servant society; we need a broader, deeper shattering—a shattering of capitalism itself.

Reclaiming a Truly Radical Realism

Despite my agreement with Thompson's thesis that it is absolutely crucial to get society to think in terms of democratic wealth instead of individual or private wealth, his narrow focus on the servant society undermines precisely that possibility. Based on the deeper conception of the capitalistic mentality presented above, it is capitalism itself that fundamentally interferes with the capacity of most people for thinking in terms of democratic wealth as opposed to private wealth. This is *not* a particular feature of neoliberalism nor of the servant society, though these problems are certainly becoming more severe in recent years. My argument for this can again be traced back to arguments made by Frankfurt School thinkers, like Erich Fromm, but also more recently in the superb work of the late Ellen Meiksins Wood.² Capitalism is an inherently undemocratic process. This is quite obvious and not something that I think Thompson would necessarily disagree with. What is undertheorized in his argument, though, is how the undemocratic nature of capitalism produces an undemocratic capitalistic mentality that, until superseded, will undermine the popular emergence of a new way of thinking connected to his idea of democratic wealth.

If I do not see my fellow citizens or residents as inherently worthy of a considerable basic share of the social product to begin with, why would I be able to simply switch from my private conception of wealth to a more democratic one? Such a shift would require a radical change in the heart of humanity, to use an updated version of Fromm's older phraseology.³ Such a shift on a mass societal scale is not only inconsistent with the servant society, but it is more fundamentally inconsistent with the capitalistic mentality and the capitalist mode of production more broadly.

While Thompson may find the grand theorizing associated with post-work imaginings misguided and unhelpful, he is empirically off-base to eschew them as summarily as he does. These imaginaries are absolutely crucial given the massive increase in automation of recent years (which is only likely to increase into the future). He mentions Uber in his article as a prime example of the servant society, but is Uber really fundamentally different from taxi services, which have existed in various forms for a century? Plus, Google and Uber have both made substantial progress on self-driving vehicles that would make the labor of a driver in any context, including trucking, completely obsolete. Labor is increasingly menial and precarious, largely due to automation. Recent studies have suggested that 40 percent of all jobs are either already susceptible to automation (partial or full) or will be by 2050.⁴ New jobs will be created of course, but even if unemployment were only to increase by half or a quarter of that 40 percent, society will still more rapidly descend into what Rosa Luxemburg would surely recognize as "barbarism"—so long as one's ability to live an even somewhat comfortable life remains tied to one's labor, whether industrial, service/servant, or intellectual.⁵

Thompson does not, however, focus his analysis and critique of the servant society through to the foundational traits of capitalism, but instead focuses on the massive inequality it (re)produces and on which this new era of capitalism is based. However, the concept of the capitalistic mentality challenges us to ask what kind of consciousness, culture, or social psychology allowed this (acceptance of) massive inequality to emerge in the first place?

The capitalistic mentality provides a rather clear answer: The same kind of capitalistic thinking that allows for exploitation to become justified and normalized—becoming identified with freedom itself—is the root of the justification and normalization of the massive amounts of inequality and eventually the servant economy itself. If capitalistic societies have largely accepted exploitation, why

should we be at all surprised that they would also accept massive amounts of inequality and atomized, app-based servitude?

In order to adequately resist the most pernicious aspects and consequences of the servant society, which should be understood as the manifestation of more fundamental dimensions of capitalism, we must oppose and resist capitalism in toto. This does not require that we abandon reformism, but rather it demands that we radicalize reformism so that it is aimed at these core aspects of capitalist society, not just the most recent manifestations. While pursuing reforms, if they are to have a real chance at success, we must never lose sight of the larger enemy—capitalism itself.

The Crucial Importance of Social Psychology

In fairness to Thompson, I want to reiterate the real value of his piece for *New Politics* last year. Thompson reminds us of the crucial importance of examining the intersection of base and superstructure, where social psychology, and indeed consciousness itself, are (re)produced. Psychology is the mechanism by which capitalism becomes embedded in—and actually creates—who we are as people. Unless we resist both the psychological manifestations of capitalism and its material conditions, including those specific to the current period of capitalism, it is highly unlikely that any reforms that do occur will make substantial progress toward an emancipated, democratic, socialist society. Thompson's essay, and his oeuvre more broadly, should be applauded for taking seriously the importance of consciousness and culture as they relate to the economic system—even if I disagree with the narrowness with which he approaches these concerns in "The Rise of the Servant Society."

Footnotes

1. For an excellent exploration of the pervasiveness of consumption in the twenty-first century and its relation to consciousness, see Jonathan Crary's *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (Verso, 2014).
2. Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Verso, [1995] 2016).
3. Erich Fromm, *The Heart of Man: Its Genius for Good and Evil* (Harper & Row, 1964).
4. See Paul Mason's *Postcapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015) and Martin Ford's *Rise of the Robots: Technology and the Threat of a Jobless Future* (Basic Books, 2015).
5. A great discussion of the potential benefits and drawbacks of certain automation trends relevant to radical left politics can be found in Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (Verso, 2015).