

Marx's value theory and subjectivity

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In this paper I shall argue that *at the present time no single theory has greater potential for advancing the theory of subjectivity than Marx's value theory*. I do not for a moment believe that we can derive any kind of 'complete' theory of subjectivity from value theory, but rather, given the relative neglect of value theory's possible contributions compared to say psychoanalytic theory or discourse analysis, its unrealized potential contributions are truly exciting. Comparatively so little work has been done on this, that I will only be able to trace out certain general directions in this paper.

I shall use levels of analysis as a means to develop mediations between more abstract and dialectical levels of theorizing and more concrete and historical levels (Sekine, 1997). The theory of pure capitalism reveals the necessary inner connections amongst the fundamental socio-economic forms such as commodity, money, price, wage, profit, rent and interest. Mid-range or stage theory explores the configurations that result when these forms are articulated with stage specific economic, political, legal, and ideological patterns. Finally historical analysis explores actual contexts of historical process and change. My focus in this paper will be on the implications of the capitalist value-form for theorizing subjectivity at the level of pure capitalism, at the level of the stage of consumerism (post world war II), and at the level of American dominated global capitalism at the start of the twenty-first century.

In order to delimit and structure an otherwise unwieldy topic, I shall deal with three topics at each level of analysis. First, is the issue of the relationship between value and use-value,

with emphasis on value's indifference to use-value in the context of a purely capitalist society. Second, is the tendency for value to homogenize and shrink space by subsuming it to a linear-sequential time bent on an unlimited increase in the speed of production and consumption. And third is a tendency to hollow out moral, political, and rational subjectivity and subsume them to legal subjectivity.

A. Pure Capitalism

1. Indifference to Use Value

Capital in its simplest form is the use of money to make more money. In order to maximize profits a capitalist must be prepared to shift production from a less profitable commodity to a more profitable one, and this implies a stance of indifference to use-value. Similarly the total commodification of labour-power in a purely capitalist society means that capitalists can hire or fire labour-power as required to maximize profits with total indifference to the human suffering that this may cause.

Indifference to use-value is also indifference to human values and human beings. Thus capitalists, if not constrained by outside forces, will have no concern for the working conditions of their workers or their lives. Unless constrained by law or by worker organization, capitalists will always try to get the most work from workers for the least pay.

In principle, capitalists will engage in any activity that will yield a higher profit unless constrained by outside forces. Indifference to use-value implies indifference to the possible destructiveness of both the production process and the commodity output to humans or to the environment. If it is profitable to adopt a production process that spews mercury into the environment or that exposes workers to toxic substances, then capitalists will do so if not prevented by law. The profitability of marketing foods that are addictive because of being high in

fats and sugars would certainly be pursued by capitalists despite creating unhealthy and obese populations.

2. The Collapse of Time into Space and the Homogenization of Space

Because of the close tie between time and profit and because of its total fixation on short-term profit, pure capital will always try to decrease the time of production and the time between production and final consumption. The result is that other things being equal the pace of life would continually increase in a purely capitalist society. Over the long-run and without outside constraints, capital will speed up the pace of life until the recovery time required by humans and nature is reduced to unsustainable levels.

3. Legal Subjectivity

Strictly from the point of view of capital in a purely capitalist society, only the legal subject must be recognized (Pashukanis, 1978). Moreover, capital's indifference to use-value implies a non-recognition of moral, political, or rational subjectivity. In a purely capitalist society all that is required is subjects capable of owning commodities, selling or buying commodities, or making contracts involving exchange transactions or transfer of ownership. Capital needs subjects who are 'free' to enter contracts, to produce commodities and exchange them, and who can both embody and recognize property rights involving exclusive control over pieces of materiality. These legal subjects can have absolute rights over things and rights over the productive use of bodies limited by the rights of contract and exit that those bodies must have in order to be legal subjects. From this point of view the capital/labour relation is a relation between legal subjects who own and control the means of production and legal subjects that 'freely' (insofar as they are single-mindedly thought of as legal subjects as does capital in a purely capitalist society) sell their labour-power for the use of capital in return for a wage. From

the point of view of pure capitalism, the only kind of subjectivity that need exist is free legal subjectivity: there need be no moral subjects, political subjects, rational subjects and certainly not class subjects.

Were we to imagine that a purely capitalist society actually came into historical existence, the result would be a general hallowing out of the soul and an extreme externalization of the self into a commodity world. Selves would be nothing but differently appearing bodies plus the commodity accoutrement that they possess. They would be only differentiated from commodities by their capacity for self-movement, by their capacity for exclusive property rights against one another, and by their particular commodity equipage and consumption patterns. I say 'rights against one another' because a purely capitalist society is essentially atomistic and competitive, pitting individual against individual in the pursuit of profits or wages. Strictly speaking, other legal subjects are only of interest in so far as they can be used to improve one's economic position.

Capitalist ideologues often play on the fact that for individuals in a capitalist society it is much easier for them to think of themselves as free than it is for them to understand capital's logic that can make a travesty of their freedom. Ideologically capitalism always celebrates the individual freedom that it presumably promotes while ignoring the determinism that in a purely capitalist society totally trumps all individual actions with the overriding laws of motion of capital.

To summarize, the basic subject form of pure capitalism is the legal subject. Legal subjects always relate to others instrumentally or simply as bodies that may be useful for self promotion. There is no process of othering since others are always already simply other. Legal subject as other has no being except as a body with a will that may be manipulated or may

manipulate to advance profits. Such an externalization of the self implies that all selves are simply collections of external appearances. Such 'hollowed out' souls are indifferent to persons as quality, but instead relate to them as quantities or potential quantities.

Indifference to use-value, then, not only implies a general indifference to all human values except for profit, it also implies a spatialization of time that makes it strictly linear-sequential and in turn the subsumption of space to this time. And since time is money, the requirements of accumulation require a continual acceleration of the pace of life. Finally indifference to use-value is indifference to human beings except as profit or income maximizing legal subjects.

B. The Stage of Consumerism

In comparison to the rarified pure capitalism just analyzed, mid-range theory considers the way in which value makes the best out of a whole array of use-value opportunities and constraints that form the most typical hegemonic institutions of a particular stage of capitalist development. Thus it must consider a wide range of institutions whose basic character is not necessarily economic. The result is a mode of accumulation as a dominant or characteristic pattern or constellation, that has economic, political, legal, and ideological (dimensions). This extensive widening of political economy cannot be attempted in this paper because I focus primarily on three economic variables at each level of analysis

I refer to the current stage of capitalist development as the 'stage of consumerism' and locate its golden age spatially in the US and temporally between 1950 and 1970. I call it 'consumerism' because of the elevated role of the consumer in the dominant economy type of this stage of capitalist development.

Considering my three variables from the point of view of the stage of consumerism, I shall argue first that the mass production of consumer goods has subsumed an unprecedented array and quantity of use values to the motion of value, and that the resulting elevation of the consumer has necessitated strong ideological, legal, and political supports in order for capital accumulation to proceed smoothly. Second, in order to maintain profit rates and high rates of consumption capital ranges throughout the globe seeking cheaper inputs and markets for outputs. To some extent capital has always done this, only now it has the technological means and ever-expanding array of use value outputs that results in a more thorough-going search for control. In other words, a degree of commodification is now penetrating every nook and cranny of the earth and of human life in search of new profit possibilities. Space is increasingly shrunk and homogenized by the commodity form. A part of this shrinkage is the speeding up of the pace of life and of consumption, again made more possible than ever before by new technologies. Thus time is increasingly reduced to pure quantity for the sake of being sped up. Third, capital would like legal subjects to identify themselves primarily as relatively passive and gullible consumers. To the extent desires can be directed toward the commodity world then this world can seem to offer endless pleasures, and the more disruptive potentials of desire can be distracted and absorbed into consumerism. Every stage of capitalism needs to rely either on means of coercion or means of subject formation that create relatively docile subjects. Today relative docility is achieved by fostering mass addiction to commodities (consumerism has replaced religion as the new opiate of the masses) some of which are inherently addictive like tobacco, alcohol, and crack, some of which we are indoctrinated into believing we need for status or other reasons; and some of which we do need because alternatives are not sufficiently available (e.g. private car

versus public transportation). Of course, this docility (which is capital's wish) is only relative given renewed signs of resistance to capital world-wide.

In summary then, at this level of abstraction 'Indifference to Use-value' is transformed into a peculiar form of massive commoditification. On the one hand, commodification becomes all-encompassing, and, on the other, it is compromised (from the point of view of the purely capitalist commodity form) by being dependent on numerous and significant political, legal, and ideological supports. The two most important quasi-commodities of this stage are the automobile and television. Thus the particular form that capitalistic indifference to use-value takes in this stage is perhaps best exemplified by the automobile and television. The indifference to use-value that surrounds the automobile mostly has to do with indifference to the earth while the indifference around the television mostly has to do with indifference to the human psyche. 'The Collapse of Time into Space and the Homogenization of Space' at this level becomes 'Global Apartheid and Fundamentalism.' And 'Legal Subjectivity' becomes most prominently 'The Legal Subject as Toy Collector.'

1. Automobiles and Televisions

The strength of the working class in the West and of so-called socialism in the East after World War II fuelled a cold war that stimulated the development of a welfare/warfare state. At the same time, the sheer number and range of commodities increased astronomically as capitalism attempted to buy off the working class in the West with an incredible array of commodities, the most important of which were the automobile, the television, and the single-family dwelling. These were the rewards for the soldiers returning from World War II and their continuing loyalty was insured by indoctrinating them with a fear of communism that generated an insatiable need

for security that not only prevented American politics from moving to the left, but also justified the continuation of a huge military establishment.

Western capitalism was able to flood working people with commodities because of a radically increasing inequality and productivity on a global scale. Low wages and low costs in the Third World and in First World sweat shops made for affordable commodities in the rich world. Consumption was further stimulated by debt expansion and by an advertizing regime that more and more channeled human desires towards the consumption of commodities as the path to happiness. Shopping became the number one 'leisure' activity in the First World.

2. Global Apartheid and Fundamentalism

The atomizing character of capitalism sometimes generates reaction in the form of emotionally-based groupings whether families, religions, cultures, nations, or races. These reactionary groupings, as for example, the American 'moral majority' can sometimes be mobilized to support capitalism, but if this is not possible, they can always be vilified and turned into evil enemies (as in the case of islamic fundamentalism) thus supporting the more or less endless development of a capitalist military establishment.

In history, capital has been far less spatially indifferent than it would be were it able to fully realize a commodity-economic logic. It may well be that indifference to location accords with capital's self concept, but because of its historical uneven development and the development of the nation-state, more often than not it has set location against location generating either preparation for war or war. Furthermore, while the development of capital has fostered the increasing global mobility of capital, it has often placed obstacles in the way of the global mobility of labour. The result is an apartheid world characterized both by almost continual war or preparation for war and by reactionary groupings that are often labeled as 'good' or 'evil'.

After world war II the global inequality associated with the uneven development of capitalism resulted in a three world stratification that revolved around a superpower cold war. The cold war played a fundamental role in maintaining strong nationalist ideologies in face of a growing threat of internationalism. Mass media were used to instill deep fears and insecurities, requiring a strong military state able to contain or even roll back communism on every front. Hysterical anti-communist ideology often fed fear of all that was different (or other) including a vast array of racisms, ethnocentricisms, sexism, and homophobia. The need for security became increasingly the primary need and it justified not only CIA and military interventions around the world, but also domestic policies that vilified the left. The narrow calculations of capitalist profit-making were accompanied by reactionary emotion-based groupings ('moral majority') with a boundless hunger for enemies to crush. America increasingly became the world's policeman with the power to ignore international law.

3. Legal Subjects as Toy Collectors

The legal subject becomes more powerful than ever before with 'consumer sovereignty' lending its support to a certain kind of democracy, where presumably consumers' economic sovereignty consists in casting dollar ballots for commodities that they are confronted with and their political sovereignty consists in casting ballots for candidates that they are confronted with. The aim of the moral subject is the happiness achieved by maximizing want-satisfaction through the judicious spending of income. It follows that the moral subject and political subject tend to be absorbed into the consuming legal subject. This leaves a vacuum in the moral and political arenas that is inviting to emotionally-based fundamentalisms.

The consuming subject and the legal subject are mutually reinforcing. Since the legal subject is fundamentally a property owning subject, the consuming subject is perhaps the most

obvious appearance that the legal subject takes on. Strictly speaking the identity of a consumer amongst other consumers is formed by a certain packaging and accoutrement of commodities. One's self is essentially externalized through one's commodities and through other persons related to as commodified selves. Desires are channeled through commodities converting needs into wants for specific commodities and commodified persons. Status in such a world is recognition by commodified others of the want-value of one's commodified world. It is in this way that one becomes valued. Thus needs are converted into desires and wants are channeled towards certain commodities or commodified life-styles by the mass media. Indeed, to a certain extent advertizing both creates and directs desire in a world where meaning and recognition is to be discovered through commodities. The consuming subject and the legal subject, thus appear, as simply two different sides of the property-owning subject.

C. Capitalism Today: Approaching Its Limits?

At the level of historical analysis, I use the theory of capital's inner logic and the mid-range theory of consumerism to inform my analysis of current trends of capitalist development and resistance to those trends. This level of analysis, were it fully articulated, would be much broader than mid-range theory. Thus, what I can present here is even much more truncated than what I have done for stage theory.

The analysis that I have presented indicates that capitalism may be approaching its limits, though projecting trends into the future must always be speculative to the extent that it depends on how people organize to transform a seriously compromised capitalism. When I claim that capitalism may be approaching its limits, I mean to call attention to fundamental structural contradictions that do not seem resolvable within capitalism in the sense that any structural

change that would remain consistent with the continuation of capitalism could not successfully deal with these problems.

1. The Revenge of Use-Value

At the level of real historical life, use-value always forces itself upon capital's indifference, literally giving capital little choice but to take its eyes off profit for a minute to pay attention to some use-value that simply can no longer be ignored. Today the global economy is addicted increasingly to high levels of mass consumption in the richer countries. Many economic pundits have emphasized this point by claiming that high growth rates in the 90's depended heavily on high rates of spending by the American consumer, and that the future well-being of the global economy will also depend on this. At the same time, at least a fair portion of this high American consumption has been based on debt expansion, government subsidies, artificially high stock and bond earnings, an artificially high American dollar, and artificially low costs created by scouring the world for cheap and unprotected natural and human production inputs. The artificiality and limitedness of all this suggests that the American growth of the 90s was largely a fools paradise. Debt expansion and government subsidies are clearly limited, while world sourcing is also limited by political instabilities and the possibilities of organized resistance. The financialization of the global economy that has resulted in a considerable flow of world savings to the US, and hence a huge growth of US financial markets, is speculative and ultimately destabilizing. Thus the same economic force that has fuelled the rise of the American financial markets and kept the American dollar strong could in another time send both the financial markets and the value of the currency tumbling.

As value spins through the world at a more frantic pace, it becomes both more destructive of life and more indifferent to that destruction. Neo-liberals as the keepers of the budget have to make the 'tough' decisions to cut to the quick those humanizing innovations that had made capital seem to be more caring during the prosperous phases of consumerism. Thus the 'caring professions' are being cut back at precisely the time that capitalism is increasing the number of casualties that need care.

2. Hyper-speed as Exhaustion

Just as the advertizing sector attempts to permanently mobilize consumers, the military-industrial complex permanently mobilizes support by instilling the population with deep seated and permanent insecurities. These insecurities are then mobilized to support wars against vague and boundless enemies. The war on drugs or on terrorism leave enormous discretionary power in the hands of those with the authority to pursue these wars. Since the enemy is vague and boundless, such wars can be more or less permanent and can always be utilized to mobilize citizens against imagined enemies either to stimulate the economy or win elections. Since pure capitalism cannot directly generate its own emotion-based communities, such mobilizing becomes particularly important against various 'fundamentalisms.' These are spawned partly as reactions against capitalism, but must also be controlled by or subsumed to the vary capitalism that spawns them.

As speed shrinks the world and increases the possibilities of rapid movement through space of the privileged few and of capital, the boundaries of the richer nation-states are becoming less permeable to immigration. As a result the world is transformed into a hierarchy of ghettos, where the rich live in 'secure' gated communities and gated nation-states - gated against an inequality that has reached truly obscene proportions.

3. Subjectivity and Resistance

If capital is fundamentally indifferent to use-value, including human beings and nature, then all of the caring dimensions of capitalism must have ultimately stemmed not from capital but from socialized human beings resisting the tendencies of capital. It is moral and political subjects that are more capable of agency than legal subjects, who are hollowed out or externalized; and yet, capitalism has no inherent tendency to develop moral or political subjects. It follows that to effect change such subjects must be developed within and against capitalism despite capital's indifference. For this reason class formations are always heterogeneous and tenuous coming together with varying degrees of solidarity, organization, and radicalness.

The building of morally and politically informed subjectivities to counter the hollowed out legal subjects of pure capitalism is not easy. In this Gramsci, who advocated a socialist culture to counter the atomizing and demoralizing nature of capitalist culture, was surely thinking in the right direction. In the current setting, the anti-globalization movement and the world social forum are perhaps the beginning of a new oppositional force that as it grows will be able to at first challenge and eventually transform capitalism.