Thinking beyond neo-liberalism: A response to Detlev Zwick

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To do critical theory used to be fairly straightforward. The existing order of things – Global Capitalism, Consumer Society, Late Capitalism or State Monopoly Capitalism – could be criticized for its shortcomings in relation to an actually existing alternative. This alternative did not have to be fully realized to exist. It was enough that the ideas that it embodied (socialism, free love, authentic human relationships) moved the imaginations of a multitude of people for the alternative to be real (at least in the Hegelian sense of that term). To the people that it moved, this alternative seemed to have a realistic potential of actually changing the order of things. It derived this realistic potential from being supported by what Hegelians would call a historical subject, the working class, a vibrant civil society, the dense associational network that made up the counterculture, the New Social Movements where alternative forms of life could be tried out in practice, and in the end, actually existing socialism as an economic and, not to forget, military power.¹

Today this realistic alternative no longer exists: actually existing socialism has become insignificant as a geopolitical player. More importantly, thirty years of neoliberal governance, together with the transition to a new global information-intensive regime of capitalist accumulation – ‘communicative capitalism’

¹ Maybe I am completely wrong here. After all, the scholarly reader could well make the argument that critical theory was born precisely out of the loss of a realistic alternative. It was only when the left understood that it could not win that it opened up to the likes of Horkheimer and Adorno. But Marcuse’s popularity on American university campuses in the 1960s rested to no small degree on the fact that you could actually experience what it felt like to escape ‘repressive desublimation’ while sharing a joint at the love-in.
perhaps – has effectively dismantled what was left of the structure and subjectivities that supported this alternative vision. Traditional working class politics is dead, and the working class itself has been recomposed beyond recognition; people supposedly ‘bowl alone’ and the counter culture has been more or less entirely absorbed within consumer society. We have seen the completion of what Marx described as the process of ‘real subsumption’. Every alternative to capitalism has been included within capitalism and positioned as a potential source of value. As a consequence, life within capitalism has been depoliticized, deprived of an alternative in the name of which a practically effective critique can be mounted.

This makes it trickier to do critical theory. We can of course still criticize the actual state of things. We can point to the precarious relations that prevail among creative knowledge workers; show how exploitative and unjust conditions are intensified by the very forces that drive the globalization of communicative capitalism, like the outsourcing of design work; or lament the fact that a triumphant neoliberal regime subsumes and appropriates aspects of subjectivity and social life that we think should have been left alone. To produce such critiques remains useful intellectual work – I have done it in other contexts (Arvidsson et al., 2010; Arvidsson, 2007), as has Detlev Zwick (2008), and many others. To the extent that such critiques reach a mass audience, they can become a progressive impulse to action and reflection – as in the case of Naomi Klein’s work inspiring the ‘no global’ movement (to use an inadequate name coined by the mainstream press). But such a critique without an alternative remains unsatisfactory for at least three reasons.

First, and most superficially, since everyone else is doing it, the marginal utility of yet another piece of critical theory rapidly diminishes, as does the intellectual satisfaction that can be derived form producing it.

Second, and more seriously, the absence of a realistic alternative, or even of a historical subject in the name of which such a critique can be pronounced, risks rendering critical theory moralistic and rather toothless. We might agree with Zwick when he suggests that the outsourcing of design work from Toronto to the Philippines is somehow wrong, but it is difficult to understand exactly why this would be the case. (Why shouldn’t Philippine designers be allowed to compete with Canadian designers? Can the ‘creative class’ claim an exemption from the global economy? Perhaps the answer is ‘yes’, but I do not know of any viable alternative vision of society that is able to substantiate that ‘yes’.)

Third, and most importantly, in the absence of an alternative vision, critical theory remains rather unconvincing to the people in the name of whom it
proposes to speak. I can assure you – and I’ve tried! – that you won’t become an organic intellectual among social entrepreneurs or precarious creative workers by telling them that they are exploited, that they sell out their subjectivity, or that the system in which they operate is unjust. Pure critique is simply not attractive enough to make the multitude of new productive subjects, fragmented by neoliberalism, cohere into a historical subject. To do that you need at least the myth of an alternative, as agitators from Sorel via Lenin to Subcomandante Marcos could tell you.

Don’t get me wrong. I am not proposing that it is wrong to point to the precarious conditions of knowledge work, or that we should not do this as academics and researchers. This is still an important task. But it is not enough. Critical theory must do this, but it must also do more. It must also engage with the question of what a realistic alternative to neoliberalism could be, and it must elaborate a realistic political vision in the name of which a critique that is productive and progressive, and not simply moralistic, can be articulated.

By realistic, I mean that such an alternative must be sought in the actual relations of production that characterize the contemporary information economy. Zwick’s suggestion that we

imagine a commonism of productive consumption as collaborative sharing in the absence of private property and combined with an inclusive model of political determination, collective sovereignty, belonging and justice

– and so on – is simply unproductive to my mind. We might all agree that an economy of commons that has done away with capitalism might be more desirable, but the reality is that hybrid forms, like the game modders that Zwick cites, where an economy of commons co-exists with a capitalist value logic, in some form, are indeed becoming the norm. At that point the interesting thing to do is not so much to criticize the enduring capitalist nature of these hybrid forms, but rather to investigate the new forms of politics that they might give rise to. This in no way implies that one does away with conflict and politics. Rather, it implies investigating and understanding the new spaces and discourses through which such a new type of politics can be articulated.

In order to do this we must start with what the actors involved in these processes actually think themselves. It is quite useless to simply deploy existing philosophical perspectives, or to compare the reality of communicative capitalism to utopian projections of the political visions of last century. Instead we must start with the ‘empirical metaphysics’, to use Bruno Latour’s term, that actually prevail among people engaged in such hybrid practices. We might all want to do away with neoliberalism and the forms of life that it has promoted. But at the
same time, we all recognize that the neoliberal project has been one of the most successful projects of governmentality since, perhaps, the very project of disciplinary power that Foucault himself described. *Rebus sic stantibus* we cannot simply wish it away.

We need to recognize that people have changed, that competitive individualism, self-branding and an entrepreneurial mentality are, by now, normal features of life. The same thing goes for the popular political myths that prevail among advanced knowledge workers, what Zwick calls ‘cyber-utopianism’. We need to recognize that notions like peer-to-peer production, high-tech gift economies and the like have the power to mobilize the energies of the subjects that are most likely to become the pioneers of a new political vision – today’s version of the skilled workers that have taken the lead in most modern political movements. Even though the social theory that they produce might be shallow and imperfect, and even though they might not have read Marx and Foucault as well as we have, we cannot simply dismiss this vision as a mere ideology to be replaced by our theoretically more refined ideology.

Like the relations of production that are emerging in communicative capitalism and the subjectivity of knowledge workers, these myths are part of the raw material with which the Gramscian intellectual must engage in order to articulate new understandings of common sense that are both politically progressive and intuitively attractive to the people that they are supposed to mobilize. In other words, in order to articulate an alternative, we cannot simply dismiss the reality of communicative capitalism and fall back on what remains of the political utopias of last century. We need to engage with the reality of neoliberal communicative capitalism and try to push its dialectic beyond its apolitical present state. We must investigate what the real conditions of production and imagination are and ask ourselves where they might lead. Critical theory needs to become an empirical, and not simply a philosophical, enterprise.

So how to do critical theory after real subsumption? My position is this. New relations of production are emerging. Value is being increasingly created by putting common resources to work in processes that unfold beyond the direct control of markets and hierarchies. We can call this commonism if we want, or simply an ‘informational mode of production’ to use a less loaded term. Today these new relations of production mainly unfold within the purview of neoliberal capitalism. Indeed, it is possible to claim that neoliberalism as a political project was to no small extent driven by the need to maintain corporate control over emerging commons-based relations of production (Arvidsson and Peitersen, 2013). However, a number of phenomena – from the success and attraction of Open Production systems to the unsustainable nature of contemporary
capitalism – suggest that these new relations of production have the potential to develop beyond neoliberalism and to drive the emergence of a new political and economic order that is endowed with new institutions.

Will this mean the end of capitalism as such? Perhaps, but probably not. I would suggest a scenario more similar to the 18th century. A new mode of production is taking shape: manufacture and industry in the 18th century, commonism and the informational mode of production today. Three hundred years ago, this process was accompanied by the construction of a new public sphere on which a new politics with its particular discourses and institutions, new spaces for political conflict and compromise, and eventually an entirely new ‘modern’ or ‘bourgeois’ civilization was built. This implies that the task for critical theory today is to intervene and engage in the construction of such a new public sphere through which emerging informational relations of production can find political articulation. Such a political articulation will no doubt be different from the politics of the 19th and 20th centuries, just like modern rational mass politics was different, in its terms as well as in its institutions, from a medieval politics of elites and occasional religiously inspired rebellions. But it is through such a political articulation that many of the injustices that mark informational labour today can be addressed.

It is only when they have found a way of thinking politically about what they are doing, and of inventing a semantics of justice that can attract people into movements and legitimize their actions, that graphic designers in Toronto, game modders, fashion workers in Milan, the Philippines, India and China can build the kinds of institutions that are able to resist and moderate the impact of the logic of capital on their lives. What will they do? Form a guild, or a phyle perhaps (Uguarte, 2010)? Create a minimum wage for all members who are able to maintain a minimum reputational status? De-link from the global economy and publically burn all products that are designed by foreigners? Who knows? But it is by intervening in that process of construction, and by doing our best to push it in directions that we think are progressive and desirable, that critical theory can find a new progressive role. We should stop behaving like tenured radicals and become more like the organic intellectuals of an emerging political subject.

I don’t know if my notion of ‘productive publics’ will be part of such a new critical semantics. But however that might be – together with the invaluable help of Zwick’s critical brilliance and ephemera’s enthusiasm in accommodating this debate – my article might have found some use-value in opening up a number of crucial questions that are almost never discussed or touched upon otherwise. This, I think, is no small achievement.
references


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