

This essay attempts at a general understanding of contemporary capitalism and some of its social and mental consequences. It works through combinations and variations of concepts from classical and contemporary social theory. Some key concepts are Mammonism, acceleration, ubiquity, self-dynamics, precariat, inertia, conformity, flexibility, specter of uselessness. The text refers to classical modern thinkers like Marx, Simmel, Musil, Benjamin, and to contemporary ideas in the works of Deleuze, Rosa, Crouch, Illouz, Standing, Hochschild. It is summoned up by asking some important, complex questions that regard democracy, community and autonomy.

In this paper, I will elaborate on a conceptual sketch of nothing less than contemporary capitalism, whether we call it new capitalism, finance capitalism, flexible capitalism, or rentier capitalism, and some of its social and human consequences.

It is a bold undertaking. I put together concepts from both classical and contemporary social theory in order to develop images and conceptions of capitalism and what it does to society. I understand concepts as "means of orientation", as Weber (1988a, 536) defined his ideal types. Claims are on the one hand experimental or essayistic – an attempt, an outline that tries to approach this thing capitalism from different angles without enclosing it. I also will use the hyperbole – stretching descriptions, using generalizations. Brief, a reflection, an essay, certainly not founded on extensive research but on interest and extensions of other things I did. Hopefully, thus, the presentation will be a point of departure for an interesting discussion.

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Among others, I will refer to classical modern thinkers like Marx, Simmel, Musil, Benjamin, and to contemporary ideas in the works of Deleuze, Rosa, Crouch, Illouz, Standing, Hochschild.

Mammonism

In his famous short essay on "capitalism as religion", Benjamin called capitalism a "cult", if not the cult, of modern culture. We all belong to it, and for all the differentiations it leads to, it also means a belonging – to which we cannot say no. Capitalism saturates and structures society and mentalities. It provides life with meaning – or it substitutes meaning for capitalist values and objectives. Capitalism also is the object of worship, the profit being its core "ornament".

Weber did not conceive of capitalism as a religion, not even a "secular religion" (Voegelin 1993). But this prime manifestation of rationality, of the processes of rationalization which run through history and shape it, had one of its origins in religion – that is, in a most irrational phenomenon, if we limit rationalization to instrumental or goal-oriented rationalization.

Simmel talked less of capitalism and more of money – what we do with money and what money does to us. Money is an awesome instrument with which you may destroy and construct anything – "creative destruction" in Schumpeter's (1942) words.

But money emancipated itself from the mere function of an instrument a long time ago. It regulates life, it deprives everything of its inner value and attach to it an alien, quantitative value and so reduces everything to one and the same level. On the marketplace, everything becomes a commodity, whether we talk of material goods, services, thoughts, bodies, competences, subjectivities. And money, according to Simmel (1999, 17), emerges as divinity: the Mammonism of modern, capitalist society.

Religion, says philosopher Hermann Lübbe (1975, 177), is first and foremost a "praxis of coping with contingency". Obviously, this would be a core definition of capitalism as well. Not the invalidation of contingency, but its optimal exploitation.

Acceleration

Capitalism and money replace society, community, religion. And they replace or at least define time. "Time is money", Benjamin Franklin wrote – a modern, quantifiable answer to that eternal question what is time. And inversely: "money is time", writes Samuel Weber (2009).

Time, especially when expressed through speed and acceleration, is a core element in contemporary capitalism, whether we talk of the productive or the non-productive, financial capitalism.

Trade with shares and other sophisticated, esoteric securities – funny label – are chiefly made by computers. Algorithms are the core component in selling and buying – not human decisions. The quicker the reactions, the more likely the profit; the closer the location of the computer to the main servers, the more milliseconds to gain. Average time of retaining shares has imploded to less than half a minute. (Who, then, is the owner of companies? Who is responsible for their business?) Wall Street rather employs mathematicians than financial analysts. Time is money. And the more resources, the more time to gain.

Since the financial crisis some five years ago, a financial crisis largely provoked by computers and algorithms, a number of studies have been made on this "doomsday machine" (Lewis 2011), this "monster" (Hudson 2010), which is financial capitalism. Frank Schirrmacher (2013) talks of the financial markets as a "cyberwar" where players are predominantly machines and man himself has become an egoistic, narcissist machine nourished by self-interest, anxiety, distrust (*bellum omnium contra omnes* – also a core characteristic of Tönnies' *Gesellschaft*). To understand this reality, a mere rational choice theory would do. In fact, Schirrmacher says, the influence of rational choice theories and of game theories have brought forward this new anthropological form which we call *homo economicus*. They are, like any other theory, especially economic theories, performative, are, in the words of Donald MacKenzie (2006,), "engines", not "cameras". However, they change not just man, but the entire world: the world as "arithmetical problem" (Simmel 1989, 612).

(Man becoming a machine...: he is attracted to machines since he resembles them, envies them, worships them – the machine as fetish. And: machines invade him, literally – drugs regulate his moods, communication devices govern his attention, channel his thoughts.)

German sociologist Hartmut Rosa (2003, 2006) talks of that "acceleration" which is characteristic of a global and globalizing "high-speed society". Acceleration defines virtually all segments of society, but emerges as most significant in and through technology. Technology in turn, especially information and communication technology, penetrates and saturates social

structures and individual lifeworlds – and occasionally invades or replaces subjectivity, "the human factor". Identity, Rosa says, becomes "situative", and actions are characterized by "reactive situativity". Brief, identity defined in subsequent situations and moments, actions being immediate responses to situations; identity, action and situation as elements of an immanent game without past and future.

Some variations of Rosa's elaboration would be:

In his discussion on flexible capitalism, Richard Sennett (1998) portrays a fragmented, "corroded" social character, by nature slow, now facing swift, permanent, uncontrolled and uncontrollable technological and organizational transformation that shapes a life in "episodes".

Philosopher Odo Marquard (1987, 126) side immediately with Rosa. Modernity is not merely permanent transformation, but permanently "accelerated transformation"; accordingly the "rate of obsolescence" increases. Acceleration has become the "usance of modernity", a modern commonplace.

Korean media theorist Han (2012), in turn, talks of "hyperacceleration": productivity and communication occur far beyond their 'own', 'original' goals and consist of "hyper-productivity" and "hyper-communication". On an ordinary human level, uncontrolled behaviour in the form of "hyper-activity" is a common characteristic. We may receive medical treatment for that. What about society?

Acceleration appears as a modern, contemporary category. Austrian novelist Robert Musil (1978, 402) conceived of it as ideal and ideology too as he talked of the "accelerism" which characterized especially economic life. An ideology that promotes oblivion and undermines memory, cultural as well as individual.

Back in 1848, Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto stated that modernity turns everything that used to be solid into air.

Ubiquity

Does acceleration move in a linear direction, does it mean progress? If we mean technological, logistical progress – obviously. With regard to other aspects of life – not necessarily. With regard to some issues, for instance climate – no.

Contemporary society and capitalism take place in what appears as an eternal present. Bauman and others have varied this fundamentally aesthetic view. Activities lack collective direction. They lack origin. They occur, they happen, the entire society is in permanent movement, a mobile society where social and economic and financial mobility is praised. An endless process of trial and error, an eternal and changing loop, a "blind flight", as Norbert Bolz (2005) writes.

Time not as linear, not as evolution and not as cycles, but in the shape of a expanding and contracting "sphere". (Bernd Alois Zimmermann) A sphere that contains, that consists of, that expresses emergences and disappearances, immense manifoldness and multiple movements. A sphere constituted by the simultaneousness of differences and of different times. (Cf. Koselleck [1992, 323ff] and Blumenberg [1986, 249]: *Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*.) A temporal expression of Durkheim's anomie.

Ivor Southwood (2011) discusses this state of contemporary capitalism with regards to individuals on the job market. The individual is constantly on the move. Navigating in a world of "unknown unknowns" (Rumsfeld), he or she is working (at best) and simultaneously working for labour (more job, other job, securing job). It's a 24/7 activity, a hyper-activity – a "non-stop inertia", Southwood writes, a furious standstill, in the words of Paul Virilio (1999) a "polar inertia" (cf. Rosa). Immobility is for those socially excluded only.

Individuals on the flexible labour market have to achieve this and that simultaneously, have to be proactive, to be able to "let go", have to live "on the edge" (Sennett 1998). And capitalism and its transforming logics are present everywhere, all the time – an unstoppable chain reaction of the same and of differentiations. The ubiquity of capitalism.

Sovereignty, autonomy, self-sufficiency

Capitalism emerges as the perhaps most viable institution in world history. No institution has changed society that much, no institution has proven so able to adapt to new circumstances (those circumstances that capitalism itself brings forth). The entire classical sociology agreed on this. And was itself a response to the transformation which capitalism generated.

Classical sociology observed how capitalism was not merely an instrument in the hands of capitalists, but a force in itself, instrumentalizing the capitalists, for whom only the exploitation of the workers remained.

Simmel (1996) developed the dual notion of "objective culture" and "subjective culture". Man created money, machines, laws etcetera in order to regulate and facilitate life. Yet money and machines tended to emancipate themselves from their creators. They developed a life on their own, manifested a self-dynamics, gained autonomy and sovereignty. Man was subordinated under his own creations – "isolated", "alienated" (1996, 405). Simmel spoke of "the tragedy of culture".

After Simmel, who might not have been first, we have seen many conceptual variations of this theme. Simultaneously, experiences of the self-dynamics of institutions grow.

The most suggestive expression today might be the banking system. Banks are absolutely necessary and relevant for the system, we are told. Without them, the system fails – society, economy, family...

The financial and economic crisis in 2008 meant not the collapse of banks (except for the very worst), but their momentum. Colin Crouch (2011) speaks of their survival and in general of the "strange non-death of neo-liberalism". Banks and global enterprises under neo-liberalism are less interested in free markets and more in dominance and support. And in that very ideology

which tells us they are necessary. It is an ideology that makes it possible to exploit states and tax payers and borrowers. Banks embrace states, states embrace banks – which in turn generate ever larger profits (the states taking the losses). Banks are at the heart of that financial capitalism which is non-productive.

Politics grant bad banks financial support. Power and responsibility are separated: banks make profits, tax-payers take the losses, there are the fortunate ones and those plagued with misfortune. Protests have been occasionally fervent, but no cause for alarm. Foucault (2003) might explain. He writes about the nature of sovereign power: it is not essentially brought forward from above, but from below, by the subordinated, those who fear for their lives, their well-being. They manifest a "radical will to life" just as the child does to its mother.

Money (banks, financial or rentier capitalism): "a creative, specialised manifestation of violence", Musil (1978, 508) wrote, emancipated from society, community, those 99 per cent of the individuals.

And too big to fail. There is no alternative – TINA. An insult to reason, to imagination.

Precarious life

A new social class is emerging, writes Guy Standing (2011): the precariat. It is described also by for instance Richard Sennett, Arlie Russel Hochschild, Saskia Sassen and Barbara Ehrenreich.

The precariat is swelling, differentiated and universal. It is populated by people coming from the dwindling middle class, from the working class and from the remainder – "the outer class", which Bill Clinton spoke of, Lumpenproletariat in Marx' vocabulary, in the Weimar Republic the Luftmenschen, scattered characters living from this and that. It consists of people who have jobs and who may have lost them soon, and of people who have no jobs and weak prospects.

Of the internship generation and the post-crash generation. Of the digital bohemians. Of people who are haunted by what Sennett (2005) calls "the specter of uselessness". Of people in permanent suspense. Of people accustomed to continuous availability and persistent debt (study loans, mortgages). They find themselves responsible for their own life but have insufficient means to govern this life.

Competition is sleepless and restless, fierce and global, right down to the simplest business. (On competition as permanent state, see Simmel 1995 and Rosa 2006.) Decisions about existing and potential positions are taken elsewhere. Labour hiring companies, providers of HR solutions are the specialists in managing that contingency which is flexibility (they may have peculiar names, for instance CoCo Job Touristik GmbH). They manifest contemporary labour life as "space of flows" (Castells 2000) or it's "non-place" character (Augé 1995): work disembodied from local and geographical context and meaning and rather a matter of functional, contingent networks (shopping malls, internet retailers).

Precarious people have but insufficient means to master flexibility's permanent instability. The salariat, in turn, the well-paid managers, professors and government officers, lives off flexibility and knows how to manage their lives and hearts; they also manage the precariat and its hearts, its habits. The elite, the upper one per cent, the oligarchs, is emancipated from social realities. Their conspicuous wealth is created out of wealth and smartness. Reality is abstracted and emerges as investment options.

"Rage" is growing, writes Peter Sloterdijk (2009). It grows with uncertainty, with increased "unknown unknowns". It may or it may not have obvious reasons, but the potential is massive. Spain and Greece, London and Paris have seen rage in different forms, some emptied of all meaning and legitimacy, but most expressing protest or despair of citizens threatened to become "denizens" (Standing 2011).

The Occupy movement exists no more, but the context that brought it forth has changed little.

Where is the tipping point? Is there a tipping point?

Human optimization

A century ago, Max Weber (1998b, 521) described modern man as "not an integrated human being but a combination of singular useful and functional qualities".

His description easily fits as ideal and ideology today. Optimization is required everywhere – swift, complete, compliant, life-long, reactive, proactive optimization. (Makropoulos 2002) And possibly happy – "smile or die" is our recurrent daily ultimatum, writes Ehrenreich (2010).

Optimization concerns individuals, concerns organizations, concerns markets, concerns societies (which turn in to markets). The functional, adaptive, compatible network is the general form. Man, organization, market, society and further products and consumers constitute unimpaired continua.

Niklas Luhmann (197) writes about what he calls the most significant social quality or competence today: "connectivity". We relentlessly re-apply for jobs, demonstrating our employability and our compatibility (to men and to machines); we persistently re-apply for social roles, adapt to social settings, using our "radar" (Riesman 1950).

Gilles Deleuze (1990) develops the image of the dividual: a contemporary human form divided into different parts, functions, segments and optimized for different roles and settings. For multi-tasking. The disciplinary individual, of which Foucault talked, was a specialized, discontinuous producer whereas the dividual is "undulatory, in orbit, in a continuous network". Contemporary man prefers "surfing" rather than isolated, specialized sports, writes Deleuze (1990, 244).

No project is forever; any time is the time to move on.

To be undulatory, to adapt – to be conform. The large majority stay there. Some reside at the front edge of conformity. They are not the avantgarde, just hyper-active, hyper-functional, being the fittest and possessing the strongest impulses for survival. Those who are up for a career

must be cunning cutting-edge conformists.

One indispensable quality in the optimization of individuals regards the competence to control and deploy emotions in the presentation of self and the management of impressions of the other. Eva Illouz (2007) and Arlie Hochschild (2011, 1983) discuss how emotions have become not merely elements in consumption and marketing, but a force of production to the extent that we may talk of capitalism as emotional capitalism, as capitalist emotionalization, especially in the service industry. Emotions become technically reproducible, varied, enhanced (Benjamin); they are no longer the adversary of reason and rationality, but their manifestation in the age of technology. Just as there are social and economic forms of capital, there is emotional capital, which may be individual or organizational. Emotional capitalism, capitalist emotionalization: manifestations of the collapse of the frontiers between private and public (labour life), manifestations of intimacy as means of optimization.

The classical modern assembly line produced material goods. It manifested standardization, routines, repetition, fragmentation, simplicity, and looked just about the same in Detroit, in Stalin's factories and in the handbooks of the management schools.

A century later, an assembly line 2.0 has appeared, populated by the well-educated and continuously upgraded information engineers, project coordinators, symbolic analysts, and communicators, and below them the simple office executors. They are all functionaries absorbed in abstract processes and systems. Expected and actual results are blurred and replaced by evaluations. Informality (Informalism) is natural. Each and everyone has to be reachable anytime, everyone is armed with smartphone and laptop. Everything is temporary and everything that has been done can be, ought to be, will be made undone. The new assembly line: information processing and partial implementations, imperfection, dependence and ambiguous origins and goals, all of it "lean", naturally. Marx would have recognized it all: the executors of "virtualism" (Crawford 2009) constitute a progressive derivative of the alienated working class.

Democracy, post-democracy, society, post-society...

At the end of these sweeping, uncompromising conceptual generalizations – a few questions.

How will society be possible when characterized, constituted by accelerism and fierce, increasing competition (individual, organizational, national)?

How will vast unemployment, insecure labour markets, and generational cleavages affect solidarity?

What are the alternatives when markets invade and replace politics and the public sphere?

What are the possibilities of civil society? (Perhaps a question most interesting in societies where previously a strong welfare state had marginalized civil society, and now neo-liberalism assumes this dominating role. I think of Sweden, for instance.)

How may individual lives hold together when torn to pieces by availability, employability, competition, flexibility? Relations, families?

What do political alternatives, alternative politics look like when established parties, from leftist to conservative parties, all embrace privatization, deregulation and new public management as both ideology and practical solution? When politics emancipate itself from responsibility and transfer it to enterprises and consultancies – none of which can be accused for having anything to do with democracy? Or when decision making actually becomes so complex that outlines of future societies are impossible?

What is, accordingly, the meaning of democracy, when alternatives are blurred, power diffused and responsibilities outsourced? What's there to vote for? Are we entering a "post-democratic" society? (Crouch 2004) What would be new forms of democracy – forms which would attract the interest of the 99 per cent.

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