

The Illusion of Non-Capitalist Spaces

Why hasn't capital swallowed up the entire world yet? If we accept the machinic, all-encompassing vision of Capital, why hasn't the Earth's surface been totally blanketed by it? Why hasn't everything been chewed up, guzzled down, and spit out again by capital? One of the first things to strike the observant observer upon leaving the urban core — the center of post-Fordism, the totally administered society, the domain of machinic enslavement — for a visit to the rural periphery is that so much of the world remains caught in apparently pre-capitalist temporality and seemingly pre-capitalist modes of life.

From the Cretan countryside to the mountains of mid-Norway, life moves more slowly in these spaces than one would be led to believe from reading works in the key of Marc C. Taylor's [Speed Limits](#) (2014), a breathless account of hyperactive modernity, where "everything speeds up until time itself seems to disappear" and "fast is never fast enough — everything has to be done now, instantly." On the contrary, life in these defiantly slow-moving places seems more intimate, personal, grounded in a sort of ante-capitalist vision of human tranquility: far more so than one might expect if the only guide to our world one had on hand were Alfie Bown's (2018) [The Playstation Dreamworld](#), in which modern life is said to be "more dreamlike than ever" and "characterized by endless changeability," filled with "trancelike states" (of digital origins), where "technology moves at a very quick pace" (pp. 2–9). These authors, and authors like them, describe the cutting, leading, or bleeding edge of the [Anthropocene/Capitalocene/Chthulucene](#)/etc., as it comes to be expressed in a select few high-tech, ultra-modern urban centers which form the central nodes of capital's circuitry. But what is striking about the world today is how comparatively concentrated this logic of

acceleration remains: the gap between center and periphery, urban and rural, seems only more accentuated than before as a hyper-accelerating urban world contrasts all the more effectively with a placid rurality.

This observation only provokes the further question of why capital does not break out from its central hubs and nodes: why does it not homogenize and equalize reality, in the manner of sugar crystals being dissolving in a glass of lukewarm water? Instead, it would seem that the stirring action of capital is insufficient to disperse its contents throughout the liquid-world. The continued existence of rural ways of life amid post-industrialized societies appears a spectacular achievement. One would have thought that, if the Leninist hypothesis were correct — that capital tends to swallow up capital, as Lenin argues in *[Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism](#)* (with examples drawn from the coal and steel industries of early-twentieth century Europe) — then all farmland would tend to be concentrated in the hands of a few major agribusiness corporations and all quaint villages would apparently be decimated by shopping malls, freeways, and sprawling conurbations. One might even expect that all independent bookstores, kiosks, cafeterias, restaurants, etc. would already have been annexed by an Amazon, an Alibaba, or a McDonald's-style franchise, that is, snapped up by a handful of major service provision corporations. And yet grassroots, microscopic, or semi-autonomous dissenters remain — and not a few, either.

The answer, in part, is of course that the conservation of such micro-scale difference is itself one of the major reproductive cultural logics in late capitalism. This economic system preserves itself, which means maintaining a tenuous popular legitimacy, through the cultivation of difference, broadly understood. In geology, one speaks of a “[suspended load](#),” which is a mass of “fine particles (especially clay) carried along by flowing water or wind; they eventually settle out in calmer conditions.” This poetic description of a brute physical process that is constantly ongoing in nature also captures the essence of certain behaviors in the social world, homing in on the subjective motivations of those constant efforts to construct inter-capitalist pockets: *inter-*, not in the usual sense, i.e. relationships between capitalists, but

rather *in-between capitalism*, or *in the cracks and fissures of capital*, spaces within the terrain of capital that are left *apparently* untouched, or *for all practical purposes* seem to have been left untouched by capital.

Of course, these places are not *really* located outside of capital's circuitry — hardly any place is left truly untouched by the machinations of capital, if only through the chemical infiltration of microplastics into the pores of the skin, glacial crevices, or maritime world, as with the Great Pacific Garbage Patch — but they are “as good as” removed from capital's grip. Life away from the capitalist urban sphere really does move at a slower pace. The cabin I spend time in up in the mountains is full of slow-moving provincials who stand and stare out at the lake for hours at a time. The books I buy from the independent bookstore around the corner from where I work are almost twice as expensive as they are on Amazon, and yet the place is packed on weekends — because of its leftist cachet and vaguely progressive atmosphere. Given the fact of capital's expansive and effusive nature, how are such things even possible?

McKenzie Wark has hit upon a good answer in his reading of Marx's “Fragment on Machines” in the *Grundrisse*. In [General Intellects](#), Wark points out that for Marx, one of the signal achievements of machinic civilization is to reduce the labor-time required in the production process. But as less time is needed to make the same amount of stuff, and as workers (ideally) are allowed more free time — at least in those societies that still have reasonably effective labor unions and welfare states in place — free time becomes a time for recuperation and self-cultivation (p. 12). This turning back onto the self — the individuation of the individual worker in their spare time — becomes a crucial component in the friction-less functioning of [cognitive capitalism](#). More than ever, cognitive capitalism requires that workers pull back from the grind and cultivate their own bodies and minds, with hobbies (painting, drawing, yoga, running, cooking), with curated crafted reading lists, with motivational speakers, from Tim Ferriss' wildly popular *The 4-Hour Workweek* to Tony Robbins's Netflix hit, *I Am Not Your Guru*.

There is nothing revolutionary about this cultivation of the self: it is all the more effectively appropriated by a mode of capitalist production that has become ever-more reliant on vertical thinking, creative dynamism, and an enterprising entrepreneurialism. We can see the traces of these injunctions to cultivate the self in the business press, trade journals, and blogs habitually frequented by the Silicon Valley set (and their global counterparts): never before has there been so much talk in this information-space about the need to maintain a “healthy work-life balance,” tinker away on one’s body, or read for pleasure and delight — recall the much-touted fact about Warren Buffett, that he reads 500 pages a day, or Bill Gates’s widely-distributed annual reading lists on his website. If, as Foucault said, the “care of the self” is among the primary tasks of the modern, disciplined subject, then this has become even more actualized — made actual, or relevant — in our present situation.

Capitalism doesn’t need to guzzle up the earth because it relies on those metaphorical and literal “rewilding” areas — originally an ecological strategy recommended by the semi-reactionary sociobiologist E. O. Wilson (2016) in [*Half-Earth: Our Planet’s Fight for Life*](#) — that allow workers to rejuvenate and rejoice in themselves. Capitalism celebrates those physical, emotional, and cultural spaces that *appear to be* removed from the circuitry of capital. To allow cognitive workers, or [what Robert Reich calls “symbolic analysts,”](#) to withdraw into these apparently non-capitalist zones — temporarily, of course, for the office always beckons — is to ensure the future reproduction of a production process increasingly built around the neural circuitry of late-capitalism’s anxious, even anguished, human stock. In the face of the brain-and-body discipline celebrated and cerebrated by cognitive capitalism, the truly revolutionary act would be to pull back and never return — or, perhaps more positively, to retreat first and then return with the aim of building an entirely different social order.

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