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INFORMATION, THE LIBRARY, AND LATE(R) CAPITALIST IDEOLOGY

Abstract

Society today may be seen to be, in the words of Guy Debord, a spectacle. This essay examines what exactly that means, within the context of a state of later capitalism. There are attacks on the library and on information as people tend to take belief to equal knowledge. The entirety of the present state of affairs is looked at with capitalism and ideology taken into account. The plausibility of ideas constitutes the ultimate measuring stick.

A Beginning

To start with, capitalism has not gone away; it has been a mainstay of life in the Western world for at least a couple of centuries. There are some claims, though, that capitalism is on its last legs (see, Streeck, 2016), but the reports of its death are greatly exaggerated. As Mark Fisher (2009) says, perhaps hyperbolically, it may be easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. At the present time (a quarter of the way through the twenty-first century), capitalism is alive. It is even more attached to what Guy Debord (1994) has called, “the spectacle.” In a work originally written in French in 1967 he wrote:

The spectacle appears at once as society itself, as a part of society and as a means of unification. As a part of society, it is that sector where all attention, all consciousness, converges. Being isolated—and precisely for that reason—this sector is the locus of illusions and false consciousness; the unity it imposes is merely the official language of generalized separation (p. 12).

Witness the struggle over information. It is seen having dastardly power (to deceive and to shape along lines that do not reflect reality) by some, while seen as having liberating power (the truth shall set you free) by others. In the days of later capitalism, it appears that both are, in fact, in play. “Information” almost becomes an empty signifier. What is ascendant is what a speaker wants hearers to believe. Simple belief, though, is neither knowledge nor information. A question arises at the outset: Are libraries embroiled in the spectacle?

Debord is open about his assessment of his day, and the assessment applies equally today; “In a world that *really* has been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood” (p. 14). There is an upsetting of discourse that places an institution like the library as an enemy to be vanquished. Witness attacks, not just on the contents of libraries through censorship and book banning, but upon the library, particularly the public library, itself *qua* library. And information itself can become weaponized. For example, look at some people’s continuing to tout the putative and discounted belief that some vaccines are responsible for autism in children despite the fact that the “research” that found such occurrences in the 1990s was based on falsified data and has been retracted. Another question arises: Does all discourse (including some rhetoric in the 2024 political campaign) adopt the tactic that information is a “story?” Debord has a reply to that

question; “The spectacle is essentially tautological, for the simple reason that its means and its ends are the same” (p. 15). If information is power, then the administration of information may be the ultimate power.

The foregoing is reminiscent of the thought of another French writer; in a book originally published in French in 1969 Michel Foucault (1972) said, “I am supposing that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality” (p. 216). The control aspect of discourse and information is inescapable, and may seem at first glance to be the stuff of speculative fiction (such as Walter M. Miller, Jr.’s *A Canticle for Liebowitz*). It is no fiction, however, unless all of life is nothing more than a fiction, and the ideological use of information is indeed controlled to a very real extent. Foucault himself furthers such a notion: “The author is he who implants, into the troublesome language of fiction, its unities, its coherence, its links with reality” (p. 222). The determination, by listeners and readers, of who *is* the author goes a long way toward the realization of the impact of the messages that are sent and received. What is seen to be coherent is what is structured in such a way that the message is receivable and believable.

The Ideal of Capital

There are some realities related to capital and capitalism—without digressing into a treatise on the subject—that need to become part of today’s consciousness. That is so, even though some realities were spoken of years ago. Joseph Schumpeter (1942) wrote what seems like a lifetime ago that “between realizing that hunting for a maximum of profit and striving for a maximum of productive performance are not necessarily incompatible, to proving that the former will necessarily—or in the immense majority of cases—imply the latter, there is a gulf much wider than the classics thought. And they never succeeded in bridging it” (p. 76). He effectively describes the markets of today, as well as those of a few generations ago. There remains a belief that profit and productivity can simultaneously be maximized, and stocks are penalized when reality intervenes. The political idea of capitalism also still holds dearly to the above belief and fails to recognize, as Schumpeter did, that markets and capitalism can never be stationary (p. 82).

Witness the 2008 global economic crash. Financial institutions failed; homeowners lost their properties; people went bankrupt. In an analysis of capital in the midst of the recession David Harvey (2010) wrote, “The relationship between representation and reality under capital has always been problematic” (p. 26). If anything, that is an understatement. Capitalism, in the form of banks and investment companies, had misrepresented the risks of, for example, the housing market, even in the face of information that pointed to potential trouble. The ideological structures of capital prevented people in positions of power and influence—including within the government—from paying sufficient attention to warning signs and policy and practice failures. Harvey posited, “It was almost as if the banking community had retired to the penthouse of capitalism where they manufactured oodles of money by trading and leveraging among themselves without any mind whatsoever for what the working people living in the basement were doing” (p. 30)

In turbulent times, or times of crisis, there are precious few solutions to the problems of capital, save for more and better information. Not even socialism is an acceptable alternative. Terry

Eagleton (2011) observes, “Marx himself never imagined that socialism could be achieved in impoverished conditions. . . . Ideally, socialism requires a skilled, educated, politically sophisticated populace, thriving civic institutions [like libraries and schools], a well-evolved technology, enlightened liberal traditions and the habits of democracy” (pp. 16, 18). At this particular point in history, it cannot be said that the West can claim to possess these things. While during the recession that began in 2008 unemployment was high and home ownership was severely threatened, a different set of dynamics applies today. Unemployment is significantly lower, although the prices of rent and housing put home ownership (and even finding adequate housing) out of the reach of many people. There is a contradiction in the customary logic of capital, as Harvey (2018) points out; “If the circulation of capital is under immense competitive pressure to accelerate, then this requires speed-up in consumption” (p. 198). (N.B.: I mention the works of Harvey, Eagleton, and others deliberately as information that is readily accessible, but is very infrequently attended to. These works exist in libraries if people had the notion to consult them as alternatives to received thought.)

Technology has been mentioned by Harvey and other commentators as a prerequisite for a healthy economic structure. This has been in place for some time, and even has been growing rapidly recently. We can turn to Harvey (2006) once again for a take on the subject; in a book originally published more than four decades ago he stated, “Improvements in techniques of information transfer are therefore as fundamental to accumulation as the revolutions in transportation that enhance the mobilities of commodities” (p. 386). Information itself can thus become commodified. It is not (merely) an essential element in the production of knowledge, it is necessary to the production, reproduction, and distribution of capital. Those who are informationally disadvantaged are also economically disadvantaged as information becomes reified. Thomas Piketty (2020) says, in relation to this topic, “New information technologies have given rise to previously unknown forms of cultural, sociopolitical, and political-ideological exchange and interdependence” (p. 649). This may be so, but the changes have not necessarily been shared equally in the age (since about 1990) of what Piketty calls “hypercapitalism.”

The logic of later capitalism is seldom challenged outside the halls of academe, where information and libraries are valorized. Harvey (2010) has noted that “Questioning the future of capitalism itself as an adequate social system ought, therefore, to be in the forefront of current debate. Yet there appears to be little appetite for such discussion,” (p. 217) even as the rhetoric of such things as free markets and private property remain in the public discourse. He continued, “The trouble in these times is that most people have no idea who [John Maynard] Keynes was and what he really stood for, while understanding of Marx is negligible” (p. 238). Education would be key to rectifying these ills, if education were not in danger of being controlled by particular political factions, to the exclusion of dissenting voices. Even libraries are under fire for containing content, such as critical race theory, not sympathetic to those factional ideals.

It is not infrequently said by economists that predictions related to capital and markets are difficult because of the existence of imperfect information. What is usually meant by that caveat is that there are not enough reliable data about people’s behaviors to render predictions sustainable. The actuality may be that this kind of information will never be available, since individuals are largely unable to articulate their reasons for certain actions and beliefs, plus a realization that the actions and beliefs are highly changeable. In the absence of that kind of

information, there is the possibility of *information*. In a separate work I (2024) attempt to offer a definition of information that depends directly upon meaning and truth in our discursive practices. Truth actually does require explicit criteria that are achievable and can thus go a long way to providing validity to information. (See that 2024 work for an extended discussion of this matter; there is not space to go into it here.) The discussions on capital can take place, but not within a closed political and ideological space.

Where Ideology Comes In

Ideology, as most are aware, can have several meanings and usages. It frequently appears in a pejorative sense, as Eagleton (1991) states, it can be “false ideas which help to legitimate a dominant political power” (p. 1). However, it has another, broader, and more neutral usage that we all should be aware of; “the process of production of meanings, signs, and values in social life” (Eagleton, 1991, p. 1). That meaning allows one to analyze what is said and written according to what the speaker or author may intend to be communicated, within the above definition of information and whether or not the speech or writing *adheres* to the definition. John Thompson (1990) employs “ideology” in the first of Eagleton’s meanings when he writes, “*Ideology, according to the epiphenomenal conception, is a system of ideas which expresses the interests of the dominant class but which represents class relation in an illusory form*” (p. 37, italics in original). It is tempting to draw from Thompson, but the temptations is resisted on the present occasion.

Instead, Piketty (2020) will be the usage here:

I use “ideology” in a positive and constructive sense to refer to a set of a priori plausible ideas and discourses describing how society *should* be structured. An ideology has social, economic, and political dimensions. It is an attempt to respond to a broad set of questions concerning the desirable or ideal organization of society. Given the complex of issues, it should be obvious that no ideology can ever command full and total assent; ideological conflict and disagreement are inherent in the very notion of ideology (p. 3, italics added).

Piketty employs this framework to observe that “Every human society must justify its inequalities: unless reasons for them are found, the whole political and social edifice stands in danger of collapse. Every epoch therefore develops a range of contradictory discourses and ideologies for the purpose of legitimizing the inequality that already exists or that people believe should exist” (p. 1). He is describing (and is correct to describe) a material and an existential reality. This calls to mind the other reality of informational inequalities and the absence of an ability to be informed. Piketty wonders the fundamental issues of capitalism are and suggests that one is “the question of what the nature of the political regime should be. . . . Another fundamental issue has to do with the property regime, by which I mean the set of rules describing the different possible forms of ownership” as well as procedures for regulating property relations (p. 4). These two issues are unspeakably important. While “information” is absent from the index to Piketty’s book, the resolution of the issues depends on a genuinely informed and reflective populace. Libraries, while being under fire from benighted reasons, are not, at the present moment, poised to inform. The collections, access points, and services are effectively curtailed by political forces seeking to control ideas.

I must confess that a portion of the argument presented here is just a bit parochial. The assault on libraries, while not strictly limited to the United States, may be most recurrent there. That said, the prevailing ideology is much more global in nature and in impact. With relation to capital, what Andrew Levine (2004) has to say bears some consideration. He notes that “it is the global preeminence of American capitalism in the present period, not the provenance of the ideas that comprise it, that makes the American ideology *American*” (p. 8). It is true that China, India, and other nations may threaten, to a degree, American capitalism itself, but the tactics of that brand of capitalism could still be seen as preeminent. In a more prescient way, Levine strikes at a feature of later capitalism (post-2008-recession) when he writes, “the claim that Reason itself is oppressive, if taken to heart, could impede the development of richer notions of Reason in society than the American ideology assumes; notions that could prove indispensable for changing society radically for the better” (p. 13).

Returning to Piketty (2020), he says:

Inequality is neither economic nor technological; it is ideological and political. . . . In other words, the market and competition, profit and wages, capital and debt, skilled and unskilled workers, natives and aliens, tax havens and competitiveness—none of these things exist as such. All are social and historical constructs, which depend entirely on the legal, fiscal, educational, and political systems that people choose to adopt and the conceptual definitions they choose to work with (p. 7).

Can informational inequality be recognized in the same way that material inequality is by Piketty? Yes and no. There are definite political and historical sources, but those who are touched by informational inequality may not be likely to see it. On the contrary, if a person were able to quote disinformation and misinformation, that person may not be able to see them for what they are and may mistake them for being informed. In fact, Piketty explains the phenomenon precisely; “often it is those who claim to be purely pragmatic who are in fact most ‘ideological’ (in the pejorative sense): their claim to be post-ideological barely conceals their disdain for evidence, historical ignorance, distorting biases, and class interests” (p. 9).

Where Do We Stand?

It may be tempting to claim that there is no solution to the ideological and capitalist predicament. The actual resolution requires concentration on the sources of the problem themselves. If indeed those who are in control are afflicted in the ways Piketty says they are, there must be a replacement for them with those who exhibit the opposite qualities. This likewise requires a populace and an electorate who are genuinely informed, people who have historical sensibility, who are sensitive to the strictures of evidence, who are able to argue (in the Aristotelean and Socratic sense of the word), and who reflectively pay attention to what is said and done. In such a world, information reigns and libraries are loci for those who desire to be informed. Information is unfettered; a reader can consult both Keynes and Friedrich Hayek, for example, and can weigh the merits of each in a way that considers the totality of what they have to say. This is not a utopian vision; it is a possibility, but it requires also a will to deny the misinforming strategies of some in power and an embrace of ideology in Piketty’s meaning—plausible ideas, social sensibility, and an ideal organization of society in general.

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