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Exploring the Capitalism-War Connection.**

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**The Dark Underbelly of Capitalism:
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Marius Nijenhuis

Kant famously wrote that “the spirit of trade [...] cannot coexist with war” and that liberal capitalism creates “perpetual peace” (1795, 92). More recently, it has again become popular to argue that liberal capitalism is ‘the best’ system of government. Fukuyama (1992) famously heralded Western liberal democracies as “the end of history”, and proponents of democratic peace theory argue that liberal capitalism creates peace and prosperity (see for example Mousseau 2019). The well-known post-workerist Maurizio Lazzarato approaches the capitalist system from the opposite angle by exploring the connection between capitalism and war. Over the last decade, Lazzarato (2012; 2014; 2015) has explored the subjectivation and enslavement inherent to capitalism and the way in which financialization and indebtedness operate as particularly insidious mechanisms of control. In *Capital Hates Everyone: Fascism or Revolution* (2021), Lazzarato takes a particularly radical approach. In this book he draws on Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault, and Marx, among others, to argue that capitalism has an inherently violent and conflictual nature. He uses the book to argue that capitalism cannot be understood separately from historical and contemporary fascisms.

One reason for why capitalism continues to appear so peaceful and non-violent is specific to the neoclassical economic theory that dominates our contemporary understanding of capitalism. Within neoclassical economics, capitalism is typically understood as a system of free and (formally) equal economic actors that enter into peaceful and mutually beneficial exchanges. Graeber (2011, 21–41) argues that this view of the economy results from “the myth of barter”, the idea that capitalism originated when one farmer needed milk and the other needed vegetables, leading these equal parties to barter their goods for mutual benefit. However, in practice capitalism has a dark underbelly of violence and exploitation which it hides through its veil of formal freedom and equality. Marx already noted that a prerequisite for capitalist relations was “primitive accumulation”, the expropriation of land and property and their concentration in the hands of the few (1867, 873–876). In this regard, Marx (1867, 878–895) used the famous example of the British “enclosure movement” and the violent expropriation that this land-grabbing of the commons by the wealthy constituted.

More recently, various scholars have noted how violent dispossession continues to function under capitalism (see Harvey 2003; Li 2014). Thus, many capitalist exchanges, especially those done in and through the Global South, are made possible via violence or the threat thereof. Moreover, private property is itself constituted and maintained through violence and coercion. As Graeber (2011, 160) remarks, “think about what would happen if you were to insist on your right to enter a university library without a properly validated ID”. Under capitalism there exists a comprehensive juridico-political system of coercion and force without which existing property relations would break down (Cohen 2011). Moreover, real-world capitalist relations are almost always characterized by unequal power relations due to past oppression, rendering racial, sexual, and other forms of exploitation possible through the vehicle of the ‘free’ and ‘equal’

capitalist system (Mills 2017, 113–135). Is it any wonder, then, that many academics in Western Europe are white, whereas the cleaning staffs in the universities often consist of people of color?

In *Capital Hates Everyone*, Lazzarato takes inspiration from Foucault's 1975–1976 *Society Must Be Defended* (2003) lectures, in which Foucault approached power relations through the prism of civil war. Lazzarato contrasts this approach with how Foucault analyzed neoliberalism in his 1978–1979 lectures on *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008) as a predominantly non-violent governmentality, viz., as a non-violent “art of government” (Foucault 2007, 92), that mostly relies on incentives and stimuli, rather than coercion and force, to govern behavior. Foucault argued that neoliberalization entails the subjectivation of individuals into “entrepreneurs of the self”, always concerned with growing their ‘human capital’ by becoming fitter, happier, more productive (2008, 226). In this way, neoliberalization transforms how we operate within the economic system and within (formerly) non-economic realms of life like health, fitness, and relationships. Lazzarato criticizes authors such as Dardot and Laval (2014) and Brown (2015; 2019) who, inspired by *The Birth of Biopolitics*, understand neoliberal capitalism as predominantly non-violent (Lazzarato 2021, 27–28). Lazzarato, in contrast, argues that all capitalisms, including neoliberal capitalism, have a violent undercurrent which consists of interrelated but irreducible (literal and figurative) wars on the basis of class, race, and gender. In the words of McClanahan (2017, 512), the idea that neoliberalism is characterized by subjectivation rather than force seems to be the standpoint of “the subject who polishes her college application, who selects among schools for his kid, who improves her scholarly CV through obtaining national grants”. It is emphatically *not* the standpoint of a Chinese worker screwing in backplates of iPhones for 29 days a month.

Lazzarato uses the first two parts of *Capital Hates Everyone* to construct a post-workerist conception of capitalism that is influenced by Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) theory of machines. Lazzarato understands capitalism as “a series of devices for machinic enslavement and [...] social subjection” (2006). These machinic assemblages are not technological per se, as there are various kinds of machines (technological, social, economic) that shape our lives. In Lazzarato's conception of capitalism, capital and labor are always at war, with putative social stability only being the result of one faction's temporary dominance. Lazzarato argues that within contemporary neoliberalism, which is characterized by the far-reaching financialization of our everyday lives and a dominance of capital over labor, our democracies are rendered increasingly illiberal by the dominance of the “capitalist war machine” that turns everything and everyone into cogs of capital's machine (2021, 165). Thus, Lazzarato explains how even leftist parties like Brazil's Worker's Party have become unable to escape the logic of financialization, as it has relied on debt as a means to give the poor access to essential services (31–40). Lazzarato argues that the resentment, frustration, and isolation of the “indebted men” that are created by this financialization only fans the flames of the new fascisms of Trump, Bolsonaro and friends (see Lazzarato 2012; 2015). Given the logic of war underlying capitalism, Lazzarato argues, these new fascisms are “the other face of neoliberalism” (2021, 9), and they are not some perverse neoliberal side-effect or

“neoliberal Frankenstein”, as Brown (2019) argued. In this regard, Lazzarato points to the affinity of some neoliberals for right-wing dictators – Hayek infamously preferred a “liberal dictatorship to a democratic government devoid of liberalism” (Caldwell and Montes 2015, 44; Lazzarato 2021, 46–47) – and Lazzarato points to older syntheses of capital and fascism (like Nazism) to argue that the new fascisms are merely the other side of neoliberalization (2021, 41–46).

Lazzarato’s examination of capitalism via the prism of war helps underscore the looming conflicts, the violence and exploitation, as well as the possibilities for revolution, that underly a capitalism of ever-deepening cleavages between winner and loser, subaltern and dominant, colonized and colonizer, man and woman, Dalit and Brahmin. Thereby, he lays bare the nasty and brutish side of capitalism. At the same time, and perhaps due to his Marxist sympathies, Lazzarato also risks developing a kind of totalizing theory which Foucault (2007, 6), as well as other postmoderns like Lyotard (1984), rightly criticized as inadequate for understanding social reality. The attempt to collapse all instances of capitalism into an all-encompassing theory of ‘capital’ and ‘war’, of ‘fascism’ and ‘revolution’, creates an understanding of society which is not equipped to cope with the multiplicity of social reality. It renders both capitalism and war as unitary and monolithic processes with always and everywhere the same underlying dynamics. One could therefore ask Lazzarato: How should we understand the “varieties of capitalism” and the “varieties of neoliberalism” which exist in different countries in regard to his seemingly totalizing theory of ‘capitalism’ (Hall and Soskice 2001; Birch and Mykhnenko 2009)? Has there been no relevant improvement between the capitalism of, say, the colonial period, and the capitalism of the twenty-first century? And does Lazzarato not underestimate the power that certain players have under neoliberalism to influence the underlying capitalist dynamics for the better, and to rein capital in a bit, as one could argue might be reflected by the recent agreement on an international corporate tax rate by the G7 (Rappeport 2021)?

Lazzarato uses the third and final part of the book to critique the limitations of the ‘post-68 movement’ in philosophy, by which he refers to, among other things, French Theory and Postcolonial Theory. What Lazzarato argues for, in our current predicament, is not just a social revolution that contests contemporary subjectivities and normalization processes, which is the focus of much post-68 thought, but also a political revolution ‘beyond capitalism’ (2021, 233). Making the Chinese workers at Foxconn or the Bangladeshi slaves in Qatar aware of their subjectivity and the normalizing forces at play, in so far as they are not already aware of these things, is in itself insufficient for freeing them from their predicament and will only make their lives appear more miserable. Hence, the exploited and enslaved (the Global North’s precariat and proletariat, the Global South, people of color) do not just require a “revolutionary theory” which exposes relations of domination and subjectivation, they also need “a theory of revolution” which contains “strategic principles” to successfully establish the new world (Lazzarato 2021, 235).

There is a certain risk in revolutionary theories becoming disconnected from theories of revolution, which can be seen clearly under neoliberal capitalism. The social revolutions that have been brought about by the post-68 movement, however

emancipatory they may be, have again and again been co-opted by the dynamics of capitalism and put to use to hide capital's ugly face. Thus, the struggle against racism is co-opted for promoting one's global sports organization whilst simultaneously sponsoring large-scale slavery; LGBTQI+ rights are turned into something for selling electronic devices which are made on the backs of Chinese workers; and women's emancipation is deployed as an electoral slogan to push neoliberal economic policies that disproportionately harm welfare dependents. Lazzarato in this respect criticizes techno-optimists by arguing that technology and automation also will not free us from the "capitalist war machine" (2021, 165). Any technological machine, Lazzarato argues, is always already embedded in, and put to use by, the social machine (the "war machine") of capital (2021, 119). What we need is thus a social and political revolution away from capitalism, not merely 'technological innovation' by way of capital. Capitalism, then, is in some sense akin to 'The Blob': it is a depersonalized monster that consumes everything (technologies, social movements, etc.) in its path only to become stronger, bigger, and more dangerous for it. At the same time, real social change tends to disappear somewhere over the horizon.

In my view, Lazzarato should be careful of creating the impression that the post-68 movement has failed to connect its problematization of subjectivation with systematic critiques of capitalism and with revolutionary theories directed at toppling capitalist power relations. Whereas Foucault has mostly kept a 'safe' distance from Marxism, many post-68 scholars have never hidden their affinity for, and connection to, Marxism. The important task, then, should not be to chastise this or that social movement or intellectual for failing to focus on how to move beyond capitalism. Rather, we should attempt to find a space where "revolution", viz., a movement for bringing about a society beyond capitalism, and "becoming-revolutionary", viz., creating the revolutionary subject aware of his or her domination, can come together in a fruitful manner (Lazzarato 2021, 232). What we need in this regard is a 'revolutionary theory' that is produced by "future revolutionaries", and which enables these 'victims of capital' to become a revolutionary body whilst simultaneously offering "specific strategic principles" for reaching a world beyond capitalism (2021, 235). Given the multiplicity of cross-cutting cleavages that run through the social groups which potentially form the revolutionary social body, however, this will be an extremely difficult task, but considering the urgency of what Lazzarato (2021) calls our "apocalyptic times" (7), it might well be the most pressing task within social and political philosophy today.

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Biography

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