
Fantastic thoughts and where to find them: the unabated popularity of the capitalist mode of production

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The practical critique of capitalism is “the simple thing that is so hard to do”.¹ On the one hand, the miserable conditions under which people are forced to live are no secret; nor that millions go hungry or starve; nor that many – also in the UK – rely on food banks; nor that the State, in every crisis, as regularly as clockwork, considers that the livelihood of its poor masses is too lavish; nor that states threaten each other’s populations with nuclear annihilation for geopolitical gains.

Moreover, a rough cut systematic explanation for this misery is easy to come to. You do not need to consume a lot of dense, obscure theory to understand that companies produce for profit, that the wages of their employees and the preservation of the environment are costs to them, that the performance of their human resources is their gain, that the State’s imperative is economic growth counted as GDP.

It is not even that the fully developed critique of capitalism is unknown: *Capital* by Karl Marx is referenced in colleges, universities and opinion pieces. Granted, many readers might throw the book against a wall when they are treated to a discussion of how the “defects of the expanded relative form of value are reflected in the corresponding equivalent form”,² granted also that many Marx explainers are nothing but charlatans lacking a basic command of the text,³ but anyone who claims that the difficulty of this text is the reason for Marxism losing the ‘battle of ideas’ has not tried to follow through the hoops and along the leaps that neoclassical economics textbooks treat their readers to.⁴

On the other hand, here we are. Judged by its success the critique of capitalism, our project, is a colossal failure. Even in the 14 years since the Great Recession, which alternated between crisis and lacklustre growth accompanied by unending austerity measures from the State – conditions ripe for a revolution according to the immiseration theory – the best ‘anti-capitalism’ has mustered in terms of mass support in this country was a guy who thinks workers “deserve” a higher share of the wealth they create because, get this, they are necessary for its creation.⁵ As if the exclusion from the wealth they produce was not what characterises the working class⁶ and as if the wage was a mechanism to remunerate contributions to society⁷; the critique of capitalism is reduced to a celebration of wage labour.⁸ Everybody is a critic or a cynic, but the critique of capitalism makes no gains.

¹ Bertolt Brecht. *Lob des Kommunismus*

² Karl Marx. *Capital – Volume 1*. p.156

³ See *A Companion to David Harvey’s Companion to Marx’ Capital*, Chapter 1 available at <https://critisticuffs.org/texts/david-harvey>

⁴ See *The Economists: Notes on CORE’s The Economy, Unit 1* available at <https://critisticuffs.org/texts/core> and *Supply and Demand in Neoclassical Economics* available at <https://critisticuffs.org/talks/supply-and-demand-samuelson>

⁵ See *Critiquing Corbyn: Capitalism Isn’t About Sharing* available at <https://critisticuffs.org/texts/corbyn>.

⁶ Karl Marx. *Capital – Volume 1*. Chapter 6.

⁷ See *What is wrong with free money?* available at <https://antination.org/en/what-wrong-free-money/>

⁸ Our readers may object that we are here conflating two genres: political agitation and theory. However, political agitation always contains and is informed by an understanding of the world it is about, aka theory. When Corbyn encourages

Thus, judging from the standpoint of success, why does the critique of capitalism suck so badly?⁹ This is the subject of this text: *common sense*, the everyday ideology of the members of a successful capitalist society about its mode of production. It describes the relation between the “silent compulsion of economic relations”¹⁰ and the not-at-all silent compulsion by the State on the one hand, and people’s own, spontaneous and wrong ideas about their economic relations on the other.

Briefly, we will argue that this economy – which relies on the free, self-directed activity of its participants – necessitates a certain practical standpoint which its participants routinely translate into a theoretical verdict that obscures the conditions imposed *on them* as opportunities *for them*. Since this positive verdict is equally regularly presented with material for disappointment, they then turn to calls for moderation for the benefit of all. They direct their attention away from the reasons of their misery, and appeal to the State (hypocrisies included) which too often disappoints them by not living up to their fanciful moral demands. Criticism then is widely understood as moralism, and “radical” as “righteous”. This makes the critique of capitalism a difficult endeavour.

1 That economy

Let’s start at the beginning. Everybody needs stuff: food, clothing, beer, trainers, the complete collector’s set of Calvin & Hobbes ... Since most of those products are quite complicated to put together, people are dependent on each other through a division of labour. In *any* form of division of labour the producers are materially dependent on each other. However, the division of labour in *this* society is something quite different from a rational, sane division of labour between producers working according to a common plan: “From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs.”¹¹ In this society the provision of people with what they need is made dependent on money, wage labour and capital.

In this society *commodities* are produced for the market and sold to earn money. A steel manufacturer does not primarily care about the steel that is produced in their factory or what nice goods can be

his followers to demand a “fair share” by appeal to a multi-factor analysis of capitalist production, he is disseminating incorrect verdicts about the capitalist mode of production. Whatever he may think personally, he is appealing to and encouraging an understanding of the capitalist mode of production which is incorrect.

⁹ Clearly, asking this question only makes sense after this critique has been accomplished. Indeed, we nicked a lot of this text from the *last* chapter of the book *Die Misere hat System: Kapitalismus* (The misery has a system: capitalism) by Groups against Capital and Nation, available at <https://gegen-kapital-und-nation.org/page/die-misere-hat-system-kapitalismus/> It makes no sense to ask why a critique fails to convince when its correctness is in doubt. Once this is resolved, though, a lack of success does not translate into the search for a mistake in the theory: correctness and success do not need to correlate. Anyone who has ever tried to convince a Covid, moon landing or climate change denier knows this.

¹⁰ Karl Marx. *Capital – Volume 1*. p.899. The compulsion being “silent” because it presents itself as an objective constraint instead of the subjugation of one by the other; see below.

¹¹ Karl Marx. *Critique of the Gotha Program*

made out of it but the profit they can make. Similarly, the workers in that factory do not have to give a damn about the final product, they work to earn a wage. The organisation of this process is done without direct coercion or immediate dependence. Economic subjects pursue their own *private* interests, a right granted to them by the capitalist state.

The capitalist state grants its subjects liberty from each other. What Alice wants is a barrier to what Bob can do: he cannot use force to make Alice do stuff she does not want to do. This applies in general, but it also applies to objects in particular: *private property* defines a material realm of freedom for everyone which is then protected by the State – whatever they each happen to own. The capitalist state insists that, for instance, Alice may dispose over her applesauce factory as she sees fit: Bob has no say because it is Alice's property. Her will counts since she is the owner. Although Bob is dependent on the products (such as applesauce) produced by other market participants, Alice and her peers are licensed to be completely ignorant towards the needs and wants of Bob and others simply because the applesauce factory belongs to them. For all this, it does not even matter whether Alice or anybody is using the factory. You can own a piece of land in Northern Scotland without ever leaving Cardiff; this is how fundamental this exclusion is. In the same way Alice is dependent on products produced by others who were also granted their right to be indifferent to Alice's need by the highest social power, the State. The way they agree on the basis of private property is to offer their own property in exchange; to exploit some other party's interest in what they have to offer.

This implies the possibility of colliding interests: you are dependent on others and are thus required to exploit their dependence on you. That said, this opposition is rather abstract. While a high price is better for the seller and worse for the buyer, there is no general reason why the relationship cannot work out satisfactorily for everybody involved. Buyer and seller could in principle arrive at a deal that allows each side to get what they want, enough money to fulfil their needs and desires. However, *money* is the one thing that allows them to gain access to the world of commodities from which they otherwise exclude each other. All material wealth is the private property of someone, under that person's exclusive right of disposal. But, with money everything is available – storms can be weathered, obstacles overcome, previously unknown desires fulfilled. Conversely, without money nothing is available. As a consequence, the pursuit of wealth measured in money is the dominant economic purpose of this society.

Therefore, those who can, make use of their wealth to make more: they invest to make profits. *Companies* produce commodities to sell them for more money than invested and are successful if they earn more selling their products than what they pay for wages, materials, machines etc. Their suppliers have the same measure of success – buy low, sell high, make profits – which means in their transactions a company and its suppliers confront each other with opposing interests. The suppliers want to sell dear, the company wants to buy cheap, both trying to maximise their respective bottom line. When a company asks for a loan from a bank, the bank and the company also oppose each other, for example about how much interest the bank charges – a source of profit for the bank.

The examples so far spoke of opposites who both pursue and realise a profit. The advantage of one

is the disadvantage of the other, but both might still make a profit. Workers, in contrast, do not have the means to buy cheap to sell dear. They have no choice but to rent themselves out to employers. Their interest is a liveable *wage* while minimising the damage (time, exhaustion, stress, RSI) they incur for it. Their employers, in contrast, want to maximise the difference between what they pay, e.g. on wages, and what they earn – their profit. The result can be observed all around us, companies make profits while workers work long hours and remain excluded from the vast wealth accumulated in this society. Any success workers achieve against their employers such as longer breaks or higher wages is to the detriment of the expressed purpose of their employment: profit. In this relation, the opposition between the involved parties is anything but abstract, because one interest – more profit – is hostile towards the other and undermines it. It undermines it to such an extent that the State intervenes and provides workers with basic necessities in the form of the welfare state to enable them to be workers.

The fact that people busy themselves against each other in this way is something the State has an active interest in. It makes itself reliant on the self-interest of its subjects for its power: to use taxes to finance itself, to use the strength of its national economy against other states, and to create the conditions for better economic growth. This in turn sends signals to its creditors of its creditworthiness and the quality of the money its central bank issues.¹² The State supervises, fosters and relies on an economy that requires its participants to pursue their interests out of their own free will. This economy relies on the materialism of its participants. The State does not command its citizens what to produce and how. It merely sets conditions and everyone is free to use these conditions to their advantage, workers and capitalists alike. Even the most dependent participants – the working class – are not made to work using brute-force. Their material dependence on a wage produces in them an interest in working for someone else's wealth: "The silent compulsion of economic relations sets the seal on the domination of the capitalist over the worker."¹³

2 A necessary practical standpoint

The State controls the relations of its subjects, among themselves and towards itself, in the form of law. The capitalist state ensures that if people have a conflict – and they will – they execute this conflict according to its general and universal rules; usually expressed as rights. In exchange, it offers all counterparts the guarantee that their demands are valid and have as much reach as its law allows. The offer of the State under the rule of law is: if you restrict yourself (i.e. obey the law), you can make use of the highest social power (i.e. the State) and its might when pursuing your legally approved interests

¹² See *Economic Crisis (from 2007 to June 2020)* available at <https://critisticuffs.org/talks/economic-crisis-june-2020>

¹³ Karl Marx. *Capital – Volume 1*. p.899

(i.e. your rights).¹⁴ Quite practically this means that the State arrests thieves, enforces contracts and evicts squatters. If, for example, a worker or tenant breaches their employment or rental contract, a capitalist or landlord can take action against them – with the help of a civil court. Vice versa the worker can sue their boss to get their pay if it is illegally withheld. What the State will not do, though, is to make you whole again if harm has been done to you, e.g. it will not get you a new bike if yours is nicked.

The State ensures with force that the materialism of its subjects stays within the limits set by its laws. It ensures that they must get by with what they happen to own. Thousands of coppers and judges watch over the subjects to ensure that they are law-abiding. Since this way the subjects are first of all excluded from society's immense collection of commodities and are without alternative, they have no choice but to make use of whatever is available to them, no matter how meagre – wage-labour, money, law – as means. As workers, owners of corner shops and investment bankers they *need* these means.

This practical necessity of dealing with the conditions set by the State, its offer and the social relations produced by fellow market participants, requires the recognition and treatment of the objective conditions encountered not merely as obstacles but also as means. Private property excludes you from the wealth of society but you must rely on whatever you own to make ends meet, wage labour is the means to extract profit from workers but you must treat it as your way to generate an income. This is the way you get to make a living. This practical standpoint is not wrong, it is necessary.

This does not take place without thinking. When people do what they must to make ends meet, they think about what they are doing. No matter how they feel about the capitalist mode of production, thoughtful attention to the here and now is required to prevail: you must budget your money, you must hunt for a job, and you must think about how to go about that. The practical necessity of dealing with money, law and wages *as means* necessitates these appearing as such in thought, indeed consistently being the object of thought.

3 The spontaneous theoretical standpoint of a civil mind

3.1 #Hope

This practical necessity does not mean, though, that the inhabitants of capitalist societies cannot take a step back from their everyday practice, explore the reasons for their misery, and recognise the state of things the State imposes on them. Of course, some life situations make that easier or harder. But no matter how shitty your shift or how steep your career, nobody stops thinking, and nobody stops you from making sense of your conditions.

¹⁴ Whether the State actually mobilises its might, though, then depends on the relative importance it ascribes to a particular problem.

It is not like this society lacks reflection. Its members have thoughts about all kinds of stuff. Whether it is about their work, their relationship to the boss, the football club, God and the world – “philosophising” is going on everywhere and all the time. The travails of the free market are no exception to this.

How people make sense of their conditions is neither necessary nor inevitable. Yet, the conclusion that is as prevailing as it is wrong, is to translate the perspective that is practically necessary (as described above) into a verdict about these conditions. Common sense takes the perspective that everyday practice requires as the purpose of things: Commodities are produced to satisfy needs, money is a means to distribute them, jobs are there to provide a (just) wage and produce useful things, the wage is there to live, the State is there to support us, competition is my opportunity. This motivated reasoning considers the conditions it is confronted with from the point of view of what it is *for me* instead of what *it is*. This way, common sense construes the imposed conditions as a set of *chances and opportunities*.

This goes as far as practical necessities – getting your hands on money or for competition on the job market – turning into fantasies of loss when imagining their absence. Civil minds turn the imposition of wage labour through State and capital into the worry that, without the State’s protection and job offers by capitalists, workers *could not* secure a living. A world without money, private property and wage labour becomes unthinkable.¹⁵

3.2 #Cope

Yet, most people experience that their practical standpoint – to live from their work, to secure and develop their livelihood – is frustrated time and again. The wage is too low, the job is insecure, working conditions are poor, the necessary effort exceeds their capabilities. People constantly experience adversity and are confronted with the fact that the means available to them are not suitable to satisfy their needs. To explain this some intellectual effort must be made, which in the first step, separates the identified *flaws* from the reasons they arose. When decent citizens turn the necessary outcome into an accidental one they do not proceed uncritically.

- *Measure*. Poverty and misery are explained by too little or too much of a “good” thing: It is not private property’s separation of want and means that defines poverty, but too little property in the hands of the poor; not the social relations that produce money which are the problem, but too little money; not wage labour, but too low – *unfair* – wages; unemployment is not caused by profit, but by too little profit or too much want for profit; there is too little (and sometimes too much) of the State in all areas of life. In this logic, for example, the destruction of the planet is *because* the State does not regulate pollution properly, as if the *absence* of something (regulation) could explain the *presence* of something else (pollution)¹⁶. Why capitalists pump toxins

¹⁵ See every think piece ever invoking “human nature”.

¹⁶ An analogy: the presence of a loud bang is not explained by the absence of soundproofing but by reference to whatever

into the air and rivers, why they do what they do, is thus removed from consideration. Rather than asking the reason why something is happening, the question becomes: how much of this is good/too much/too little. The question is turned into one of quantity, of measure, of moderation.

- *Personal.* Too much, too little, moderation – this logic is also applied to people. First, by looking inward. Confronted with a world of opportunity paired with recurring frustration the orthogonal conclusion is: “I did not apply myself”. Failure is explained by the fact that you did not make enough of an effort, did not give enough, did not sacrifice enough, did not meet the standard. You have to work on your attitude, so next time do it differently and work harder. And if that does not work either? Then you are a failure either in that field or perhaps altogether. When confronted with failure, the practical duress to relate to the given conditions as opportunities is translated into the verdict of not having done that. This means more effort or a redefinition of what to expect. The same thought is turned against others: If they are poor it is their fault, they must redefine the amount they need to live on or someone else should.
- *Social.* Common sense concludes: If I always make an effort and nothing comes of it then society is not an ensemble of opportunities – although it *should* be. Something or someone keeps disturbing the conditions for my – all our – success: some people, many, a particular industry, finance capital, politicians, foreigners, Jews. A group or some individuals have subverted or perverted what otherwise must be described as good. In this way of thinking, it is not, say, the profit calculations that decides wage and rent levels¹⁷ of young people – and everybody else – but greedy pensioners bleeding the welfare state dry by enjoying their triple locked poverty levels, wasting the NHS’s resources by refusing to die already. They prevent all our realisation of moderate gains.

4 Everything in moderation, even moderation

This way, the interest in getting ahead extends into demands for correct behaviour directed at everyone. The object of concern is no longer the conditions they are confronted with but how people behave. In their respective search for personal advantage, everyone should ensure that the “good opportunities” for others are not damaged too much and that they make a contribution to the greater good. This is moral thinking.

Decent citizens appreciate the opportunities they are presented with – they can try to get that job, apply for that loan to start a business, win the lottery. Taking inspiration from the restrictions imposed on them and the offer made by the State, they think of moderation as reciprocal: if each of us mod-

made that bang.

¹⁷ See *Housing Crisis* available at <https://critisticuffs.org/texts/housing-crisis>

erates ourselves, gives and does not just take, and lives by the rules then we all prosper, get what we want. They expect this imagined relation of quid pro quo to be honoured, expect what is fair and what is deserved: a fair wage for a fair day's work, a just minimum level of sustenance as a member of the national community, a just reward for providing jobs etc. In this ideal, if everybody takes a step back from their respective interests, if all work hard and contribute, if all interests are moderated in the name of the common good then they all get the fair share they deserve.

In a situation of competition, of state-supervised all against all, in which people go under if they do not look after their self-interest, they are asked to not only think of themselves but hold back, to think of others and the community. This, which is a contradiction, is turned into a mental maxim, a useful guideline, which ought to regulate relations to the satisfaction of all amid this mess. People expect each other to relate to their own practice in this way. But since this practice consists of competition that relies on state-imposed moderation, this contradiction cannot be eliminated in thought but consistently finds expression in the moral demands they make against each other – and in their outraged judgements when these standards are inevitably not met.

Despite being inspired by law, moral thinking has its own ideas about what people can and should be allowed to do – and those ideas deviate from the law. Q: “Is it okay for a company to lay off most of its workers?” A: “No, it ruins their livelihoods for selfish self-interest.” Alternatively: “Yes, it's the only way to save jobs.” The particular answer is not so important here, what matters is the shared perspective: individual interests are justified in how they contribute to society. Individual interests are unjustified in moral thinking if they are oblivious to or detrimental to the common good. Morality claims to be absolute, each moral standpoint claims to be the standpoint of the universal good, but is individual and particular, it is just the product of the capriciousness of whoever holds that particular moral position. This is why morality is so refreshingly flexible on what is and isn't in the general interest.

The versatility of moral thinking is also illustrated in its ability to provide the material for the justification of one's own advantage. Success is “morally clean” when it is deserved: when there is achievement and effort behind it. Of course, “you can't make a Tomelette without breaking some Greggs”. Moralists know that if they are always a stickler to the rules, they will not get far. Besides, they already paid quite a lot of tax. Those who have given a lot, can and must get something back: push ahead, think of themselves, assert themselves against their competitors. Far from being immoral, the self-interest of the competitive subject knows how to justify its own advantage.

The consistently produced losers, on the other hand, can hang their heads in shame for their lack of success or can rejoice in the opportunity to let off steam about the undeserving rich or poor. Whatever the target, this sort of envy and contempt does not improve the conditions for those who hold it. When left-wing moralists complain about Boris Johnson's creative attempts to refurbish his flat or when right-wing moralists celebrate the x-th downward revision of the living standard of people dependent on benefits: their jobs still suck, are still insecure, money is still not enough, the weekend is still too short. Critical as they are, they direct their attention away from the conditions making them miserable,

dedicated to piling on. The benefit – the moral benefit – they take from all this is nothing but the glee in other people being given the treatment they deserve.

With their moralistic ideals they appeal to the State, formally or informally. However, because the State's purpose is not to realise the conflicting moralistic ideals of its subjects but rather its power and a strong capitalist economy, it tends to fail to live up to the expectations of its moralistic critics. What they imagine as decent and fair is not on its agenda.¹⁸

As inconsequential as moral outrage down at the pub is, it still claims to want something from the world, it demands some change, however wrong. Alternative resolutions of the continuous failure to realise your ambitions are to turn inwards:

- First, there is *cynicism*: oh, the naivety of not knowing how the world works, how politicians and corporations are corrupt, it's the way of the world. This is the standpoint of being in the know without giving a single reason for anything. A standpoint that is content in being clever. With the feeling of personal sublimity they accommodate themselves to their conditions.
- Even more submissive is the resolve to ascribe *meaning* to everything. "Everything happens for a reason" is a way of checking off, well, everything. Not so different is to find *virtue* in the lack of success: "I was always honest; I did not sell out, I remained a good person, I don't want too much". These standpoints give up on calculations of economic benefit and harm by reference to the grand scheme of things.
- Alternatively, the arrangement with what is may take a bleak form: "*just get on with it*". For this standpoint, the theoretical back and forth – "capitalism good, but bad consequences, so what's the problem, me, the others, or maybe the government lost sight of its mission" – is checked off as mere theory and fruitless for everyday practice. This standpoint at its worst merely suggests endurance, and at its best aims to "make the best of it", i.e. resolves to mistake conditions for chances and opportunities without brooding.

5 So what?

To recap:

1. In "A necessary practical standpoint" we started by explaining that the capitalist economy forces its participants to relate to the objective conditions imposed on them as their means. All must relate to their jobs as their way of making ends meet, because – when they do – they are. Through their free and self-directed activities, the members of a capitalist economy impose these conditions on each other.

¹⁸ Nevertheless, this sort of abstraction from their own misery is productive for ruling over the poor masses. See e.g. *Benefit envy without benefit* available at <https://gegen-kapital-und-nation.org/en/benefit-envy-without-benefit/>

2. In “The spontaneous theoretical standpoint of a civil mind: #Hope” we then observed that many then take this practical necessity as the conclusion about the objects they are dealing with: a job is there to provide workers with a decent livelihood.
3. In “The spontaneous theoretical standpoint of a civil mind: #Cope” we then finished by explaining that the continuous frustration of this relation is dealt with as a deviation from an ideal, from a right measure, from a balance.
4. In “Everything in moderation, even moderation” we then described the travails of moralism, the demand on others to do better for the common good, and how it replaces engagement with the economic objects at hand.

In summary, we have discussed how false ideas about the capitalist mode of production have their material basis in the social relations between society’s participants and the really existing social authority, the State. But we have also discussed how these false ideas exist because people accept them for themselves, understand them, and integrate them into their worldview. These thoughts are not necessary, they are thoughts they make. All people are equipped with will and the ability to think. They can determine and explain their conditions. People can face up to these explanations, form a judgment on their basis and then make a decision: to confront the conditions that make and keep them poor, stressed and fatigued.

Wrong thinking matters. It matters because subjects with the proper attitude are easier to rule – private property being appreciated means it does not need to be actively imposed at all times, leaving only the exceptions to this appreciation to be dealt with. It also matters because this society relies on the self-directed attention and activity of its poor and not-so-poor masses to produce the wealth in private hands and the might of the State.

Critically, false thinking matters for *our* project. The wrong ideas that people have might be of somewhat secondary concern to the thought leaders of the Left, looking for followers and calling their appeals to moralistic common sense “transitional demands”, but it is a chief concern for a project aiming to make the provision for all a collective self-conscious purpose. *This* project requires people who know what they are doing and why.

For us, therefore, education is the currently necessary political tool. Yet, education is not an easy undertaking under these social conditions. It is difficult because our critique runs against the common sense idea of criticism: moral complaints and calls for moderation. It is difficult because the project is to tell people that what they do every day, that what they depend on, that what they have to make something out of, is not for them; that it is of little use to them, and on the contrary, that they are mere cogs, objects. We convey thoughts that do not contribute to progress in this society. This comes across as somewhat impractical and “unworldly”, it offers little to tackle the world concretely and almost no consolation; neither personally, nor for securing the next win for the Labour party.

Then the demand confronts us: we should at least paint a picture of the alternative. Because a lot of people want to know what it is worth declaring everything to be shit for. But, while some *outline*

of what a rational plan would look like is easy to have, the right criticism of these conditions and the design of an alternative are two different things. In order to think of a reasonable alternative, that is, one that does not carry along the mistakes from this society or that is in its critical intention constructive, you have to understand the reasons for misery. The project of creating a reasonable alternative needs people who understand why something has to change and how. This critique then has implications for what an alternative looks like.

Getting support for this purpose and getting organised with others is useful and helpful. Discussing and arguing with people also helps to avoid mistakes, of falling into illusions and hopes that promote participation.

All this can be done with us or without us. We lay no claim to being special, clever, innovative, original or sophisticated. Our project is to be correct and clear, a project that can be executed as well and better by others, too. Ultimately, what is important is not where people are organised and with whom people are associated, but what they do. What matters is the ruthless critique of these social conditions where the wealth of societies is founded on the poverty of the masses, and of any ideas that misrepresent and justify these conditions – whatever the well-meaning intentions may be behind them.

“Critique that deals with this content is critique in fisticuffs, and in fisticuffs it is not a question of whether the opponent is a noble, equal, an interesting opponent, it is a question of hitting them.”^a

^a Karl Marx. *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction*

6 Appendix: All the mystifications of the capitalist mode of production

Readers who are familiar with *Capital* by Karl Marx may recall this passage:

The wage-form thus extinguishes every trace of the division of the working day into necessary labour and surplus labour, into paid labour and unpaid labour. All labour appears as paid labour. Under the *corvée* system it is different. There the labour of the serf for himself, and his compulsory labour for the lord of the land, are demarcated very clearly both in space and time. In slave labour, even the part of the working day in which the slave is only replacing the value of his own means of subsistence, in which he therefore actually works for himself alone, appears as labour for his master. All his labour appears as unpaid labour. In wage-labour, on the contrary, even surplus labour, or unpaid labour, appears as paid. In the one case, the property-relation conceals the slave's labour for himself; in the other case the money-relation conceals the uncompensated labour of the wage-labourer.

We may therefore understand the decisive importance of the transformation of the value and

price of labour-power into the form of wages, or into the value and price of labour itself. All the notions of justice held by both the worker and the capitalist, all the mystifications of the capitalist mode of production, all capitalism's illusions about freedom, all the apologetic tricks of vulgar economics, have as their basis the form of appearance discussed above, which makes the actual relation invisible, and indeed presents to the eye the precise opposite of that relation.^a

^a Karl Marx. *Capital – Volume 1*. p.680

Marx claims that *all* ideologies about the capitalist economy have their basis in the wage form which represents exploitation – the extraction of surplus labour – as an exchange of equivalents: between labour and money. As outlined above our text proceeded differently.

1. It started by explaining that the capitalist economy forces its participants to relate the objective conditions imposed on them as their means. We must relate to our jobs as our way of making ends meet, because – when they do – they are. Through their free and self-directed activities the members of a capitalist economy impose these conditions on each other.
2. It then observed that many then take this practical necessity as the determination of the objects they are dealing with: a job is there to provide workers with a decent livelihood.
3. The argument finished by explaining that the continuous frustration of this relation is dealt with as a deviation from an ideal, from a right measure, from a balance.

Given that the account of the capitalist mode of production in this text is indebted to *Capital* the reader may wonder how these two accounts of ideology relate to each other. The central difference is that this text does not speak of the substance of wealth measured in money: congealed abstract human labour. As such, this text does not speak of exploitation, the extraction of surplus labour, because it does not have to for what it is trying to do. Yet, this means that the transitions between the points above are only *reported* rather than their inner logic given.

- First transition. Where we only report that market participants mistake, say, the wage as their means, Marx explains that it, indeed, appears as such. The wage form produces the appearance that what they put in is what they get out.
- Second transition. Where we only report that market participants criticise, say, the wage for failing to live up to being a source of a sufficient income by decrying a violation of a right measure, fairness or equality, Marx explains the logic: The exchange of equivalents on the market – money against commodity – constitutes the actually existing standard of fairness. The appearance of the wage relation as being just that then suggests the standpoint from which to criticise it.

While we think that the reduced version of the argument given in this text works, we do recommend the study of *Capital* to anyone. Indeed, we regularly offer reading groups for those who want to ground their objection to capitalism in its systematic explanation.