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The Bus Stop at the Heart of Capitalism

Jamie van der Klaauw

Ryan Kopaitich

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This contribution is concerned with a seemingly straightforward question: what, or rather where, is the heart of capitalism today? What is its infrastructural manifestation? The strange case of capitalism entails a double bind: while we can speak coherently of a singular framework of ideological and moral (social) grounding of economic valuation and exploitation, one cannot simply isolate and oppose the essence of capital. Capitalism has gotten rid of the center generally, and there is no privileged site or marker anymore, no way to orient oneself in capital's labyrinth. With it, it has taken over public infrastructure. Not to expand it, but to break it down and clear the way. Contemporary capitalism's motto seems to be 'Devolve, Isolate, and Exploit!'. The acronym is clear...

In response, those seeking to combat it — to strike at the heart of capitalism, so to speak — seemingly require a continuous reinvention of approaches. Or do they? As Azmanova powerfully states in the opening salvo of this issue, there is an awareness of the chronic endemic issues, but there is a lack of "energy for a transformative mobilization". It seems the 'revolutionary approach' is not difficult to imagine, but rather difficult to execute. Hence we fall back on trying to come up with or rethink what needs to be done, even though we know exactly what that is.

We shouldn't be too quick to dismiss this as mere 'bourgeois complexification'. As Azmanova argues, the capitalist system has a remarkable appropriative capacity. According to her, certain leftist solutions further entrench us in the problem, for example the emancipation of workers by means of elevating individual workers to a board position or an entrepreneurial mini-capitalist. It seems the slogan to counter capital's ubiquity, even if never said aloud, is: 'to fight a capitalist, we must become a capitalist first'. Indeed, the capitalist system is thereby able to redirect

the critical energy that cannot accept the production of inequality into the very mechanism that produces that inequality.

At the same time, combatting this further inward investment of capital *is* in fact further complexified by the fragmented and dispersing experiences of this mechanism. In his contribution, Castolidis shows this complexification by examining how on-the-ground workers, in his case Amazon warehouse workers in the Inland Empire in California, experience their work and workplace as totally designed to exploit them, depriving the worker of any kind of development outside of their capacity as worker, and fostering in them an 'extreme job dissociation'. This not only drains such a pocket of its energy, but also isolates this experience from others. Thereby, it appears to depart from traditional alienation, as not just a downward specialization toward menial and meaningless labor, but also a fragmentation and isolation of proto-revolutionary forces. It becomes increasingly difficult to translate the hierarchical and external pressure on warehouse workers to the internalized self-discipline of precarious workers, like those in academia. Even if their alienation and distress stems from the same overarching system.

This means that any approach to combat capitalism must be attentive to the different experiences and modes of exploitation – even as they occur within the generalized intensification of the antinomies of capitalism. The warehouse worker suffers differently, or more extremely, even though it can be related to the generalized precarity that comes with entrenchment in capitalism. The worker's knowledge of their own exploitation is less efficient in a system that fragments not only sectors of the economy and labor force, but the very attention spans workers can invest in their identity as worker. See the interaction between personal,

entertainment, and lifestyle technologies, that are able to constantly fragment worker attention. The worker's individual world is not as immersed in the immediately social, and can now be fragmented in previously unimaginable ways.

Fragmentation in itself is a power of capitalism. Divided workers are even more exploitable. The real advance of capitalism in the 21st century however is that this fragmentation is no longer solely in the experience of the worker, but has become a feature of the structure of capitalism itself. As Dean argues in her contribution, capitalism seems to have an inherent tendency to feudalize, only not as a refeudalization – like the Habermasian fear of the loss of public space, a concern in its own right by the way – but as neofeudalization, as the further development of capitalist partition and a reimagining of the feudal lord structure. The specific dependencies then, of land-owners and serfs for instance, are now digitally reproduced as 'web service providers' and 'web users'. Again, Amazon seems to be the model here: it is not just one of the biggest warehouse owners, or exploiters of warehouse workers, but much of its revenue actually comes from its web services division, Amazon Web Services (AWS), which together with its cloud services host many of the largest companies from AirBnB to Zalando.

Whether actual or digital, fragmentation within the structure ensures that there is no privileged point of entry for 'combat'. The system defends itself, decenters itself, producing a virtual center: it is very clear who is profiting from this fragmentation, and the bigger tech giants stumble over each other announcing their ascendance to, or their staying-power upon, the throne. It means that while Amazon appears as a central node, it is but one of the central nodes out there already or laying in wait. Even if

Amazon were taken down, a 'competitor' would emerge and take its place. As long as the established partition remains in place, neofeudal lords are more like the Ancient Greek hydra than the slowly constricting snake of capitalism: cut one head off and others will replace them.

So, where does this leave the critical theorist in analyzing contemporary capitalism, and the worker, the revolutionary, or members of the 'precariate', who wish to transform society away from the exploitation at the center of our social and economic systems? Perhaps the one should look to the other, especially given the discursive dimensions that are required to unify these class dimensions. For while many recognize the material problem or the 'what' is to be combatted, it is the urgency of the political aspect or the 'how', that needs our attention today.

The material loss of resources enabled by capitalism is reaching a neofeudal pitch. Investment in shared public services has stayed behind the individualizing power of advancing capitalist policies. There are more cars, more people living alone, and formerly public services have been privatized or become unaffordable in the last forty years. For example, more and more people experience the loss of the local bus stop, while you can have a drone drop off your Amazon package on the same day as you order it. And while this is a critical and decisive rise of corporate feudal power, it only exposes the problem.

Perhaps this is why, in the end, the heart of capitalism is nowhere to be found. If moving around at all has become difficult and expensive, how are we supposed to move to the heart of a structure that is out of sight?

One more daring solution could be to reimagine and rebuild the bus stop. To reproduce a working class within the neofeudalized system capable of targeting and combating it. This may sound strange, but the

power of the class position was a recognition of the other in abject structural circumstances. Sartre once tried to understand this relation as ‘seriality’ – which he explained through the most banal of examples. When I wait for the bus at a bus stop, I become one in a series that shares in the objective circumstances of waiting for that bus, at this or that stop, in similar conditions, but with different trajectories and goals – different stops to get off at.

Dean’s plea to set up Universal Basic Services (UBS) therefore seems a promising avenue. But we would want to add a slight twist. If we want to reimagine the mobilizing power of the working class from over a hundred years ago, the emphasis of its shared exploitation should be on the shared aspect rather than exploitation. In order to reinvigorate the working class as a political class, we need to reinvest, rebuild, and even expand these bus stops in the dual sense. We must develop some stable ground somewhere, a shared space, acting as the background against which our experience – of varying degrees of exploitation – is actually shared, shareable, and understandable. It concerns the real physical infrastructure, but that alone doesn’t necessarily bring us much further toward striking at the heart of capitalism. The bus stop is not merely a sign of infrastructural rejuvenation, but the reintroduction of a cogent symbolic, one that rejoins our fragmented experiences, through which we can think solidarity again in the age of digital exploitation. To this end, we must first rebuild the bus stop, and all that it stands for. We must build this bus stop at the heart of capitalism, even constructing the heart of capitalism itself – if only to go there, combat, and hopefully even defeat it.