

Book Review: Asimakopoulos, John and Richard Gilman-Opalsky (eds.), *Against Capital in the Twenty-First Century: A Reader of Radical Undercurrents*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018. ISBN: 978-1-4399-1358-1 (Paperback). 341 Pages. \$34.95.

Reviewed by B. Garrick Harden¹

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Against Capital in the Twenty-First Century is a collection of readings set as a polemic to Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2013). Organized thematically into ten sections- "Theory/Praxis," "Ideology, Class Composition and Hierarchy," "Racialization and Feminist Critique," "Critical Pedagogy," "Capitalist Culture and Cultural Production," "Language, Literature, and Art," "Ecology," "Historical Transformations," and "New Modalities of Collective Action," each section contains multiple articles from a wide range of thinkers. The various authors in each section span from generally well-known to well-known only in certain circles: classical Twentieth Century and contemporary intellectuals and scholars from "radical" Marxian and anarchist schools of thought. In the editors' introduction, they briefly discuss the etymological history of "radical" beginning in Latin as referring to the roots of something. The various party systems in industrialized "democracies" around the world all assume capitalist social and economic relations; in this way, the political "choices" offered to enfranchised denizens of those nations never allow for serious critique of the hegemonic domination of humanity by the distinct social agency of capital. The essays and articles in *Against Capital* aim at the roots of social problems caused by gross inequality created in service to the logics of capital.

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The editors took a consciously intersectional stance in their selection process. The history of Marxian and anarchist social movements is one of disconnect between certain aspects of the theories and praxis. Antonio Gramsci criticized Karl Marx for over-emphasizing the economy over other salient and no less capitalistic social institutions such as culture. Marxian theory generally, however, denounces the privileging of certain social groups to the detriment of others such as the systematic privileging of men over women and Whites over Blacks so common in patriarchal, White supremacist, capitalistic states. In application, however, further marginalized groups within larger and already marginalized groups do not receive the full equality promised by the movement. The October Revolution of 1917 and the continued marginalization of Soviet women and the virulent persistence of anti-Semitism in Russia cited in the reproduced essays by Raya Dunayevskaya are examples. Gilman-Opalsky and Asimakopoulos echo broader currents in social scientific thought calling for more research and recognition of the interconnectedness of social categories, institutions, and meaning-making systems. To put it in terms of a historic philosophical expression, “nothing exists in a vacuum.”

I am tempted to parrot other reviewers of this work and characterize it as “timely.” One of the points of this collection is to capture undercurrents of thought that run counter to mainstream ideological understandings of the world. It is both undercurrent and counter-current. While Piketty is critical of capitalism and proposes statist solutions such as reformation of tax codes, his work still takes the moral rightness of the existence of capital and its subsequent dictation of social forms and relations as a guiding premise rather than an ideological assumption. To call this work “timely” would situate the collection at a juxtaposition between undercurrents, counter-currents and the mainstream. It would seem ideological positions around the world are becoming ever-more entrenched and concretized thanks in large part to the extreme individualization and personalization of reality offered by online consumer capitalism and epitomized by social media that has fed us back our own biases, assumptions, and delusions without regard to factual accuracy under the justification of the profit motive. Not to engage in false equivalencies, the establishment left in the US certainly has backing from media corporations (MSNBC, for example, often takes a dismissive stance to progressives demonstrating their pro-corporatist bias), but no left-leaning outlet takes liberties with facts and history to anywhere near the same degree as the right-wing media universe where conspiracy theories are propagated as fact by the likes of Info Wars and Breitbart.

And as environmental crises caused by two centuries of Western industrial and consumer capitalisms increase, humanity seems set to devour itself. This consideration alone makes Piketty's presumption of capital supremacy in the twenty-first century not only dubious but horrifying. In the United States of America, discussions of a second American Revolution or Civil War (as it seems unclear if the American *demos* did resort to collective violence if the target would be those in power or itself) have not been so open since the original wars occurred.

To quote a Civil Rights Movement era slogan, "none of us is free until all of us are free." While it is impossible to ever put together a single book that is all-encompassing on any subject, and especially about a topic as large and diverse as the global domination of capital, Asimakopoulos and Gilman-Opalsky have put together a selection of readings that aptly delineate the problems created and/or perpetuated by capital while also supplying considerations of possible avenues that could potentially offer substantial resistance to the role of capital. Marina Sitrin discusses the concept of *horizontalidad* or horizontalism coming from the Argentinian popular rebellion in 2001. Horizontalism is a metaphor for a social structure without any kind of vertical ranking system. The Occupy Movement in 2011 serves as Sitrin's main reference point regarding possible effective forms of resistance to capital. While the movement was relatively short lived, it marks the growing international tension and resentment toward capitalist exploitation, domination, greed, and immoral lack of regard for life. To borrow from Max Weber, Occupy was capable of capturing and temporarily focusing the *volksgeist* in a kind of mass communal action but was incapable of sustainability as societal action without a clear and practical new social organization that would reify and unify the collective energies that led to Occupy.

In elaboration, Occupy (and more currently, the yellow vest movement that began in France) and the Tea Party (a scheme by billionaires like the Koch brothers to protect the insurance oligopoly's profit margin, but one the billionaire class lost some control of as working-class European Americans more or less successfully co-opted it for their own ideological ends) were ultimately both expressions of resistance against differently perceived statuses quo. While the Tea Party demonized government and the Occupy Movement demonized corporations and the one percent, the Marxian and anarchist response is that they are the same things. There are ideological overlaps here to two movements that otherwise seem to be political opposites. Neither movement, however, ever expressed a clear vision for new macroscopic social organizations beyond general

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goals and some specific policy critiques. Resistance is always necessary but there also needs to be something to replace the things resisted. The call for real democracy, for instance, expresses the continuing struggle from the Western Enlightenment period to re-situate power in the hands of “the” people, but pure democracy raises concerns for the protection of minority rights; what social mechanism would ensure respect for the rights of various minority groups in any given society under real democracy? In other words, how is real democracy different than pure democracy? Minority rights are not currently respected in our supposedly representative forms where governments actually exist in service to a handful of inter-related (though at times in contention with one another) groups of elites, but it does no good to successfully topple a ruling system only to allow pre-existing inequality to continue as George Orwell famously warned. Another way to frame the issue, if equal pay and employment opportunities were ensured across groups, how would it then be ensured that others accepted the money and gave equal access to goods and services in return? People’s economic self-interest is not always sufficient for overcoming ingrained social prejudice.

The above questions all presume the necessity of a bureaucratic solution. The sections titled, “Critical Pedagogy,” “Capitalist Culture and Cultural Production,” and “Language, Literature, and Art” point to alternative sources for solutions. The most effective long-term solutions for prejudice and discrimination is education and cultural change. Catching people before they internalize White supremacist and other fascistic and capitalistic ideologies will have much more lasting effects than forcing people who have already internalized White supremacy to go against their prejudices. Bureaucratic responses taken thus far, have tried to address prejudice through controlling people’s public behavior, changing culture and pedagogical approaches is directed at ideology, not people, and, if successful, could root out prejudice and other oppressive ideologies before they are able to take hold. As Henry A. Giroux argues in “Critical Pedagogy,” neoliberal capitalists have been eroding the liberal arts for decades. The focus on STEM education over all others, the decline of educational standards brought about by the broad shift from an education model to a consumer model in public education, the rise of for-profit charter schools and universities, the role of business leaders in the Department of Education and boards of regents, falling standards in primary education forcing lower standards in higher education, crushing student loan debt, and the focus on getting a job rather than being a well-rounded educated member of society are all existential and material threats to civic and moral life. As Giroux points

out, being able to function in a job is the lowest bar that can be set for education but as the new measure of educational success, critical thinking, reading comprehension, writing skills, and social and historical knowledges are increasingly ignored and underfunded. In classrooms where educators do try to enforce standards, online platforms that allow students to publicly review educators inherently rewards those with lower standards. If students have a choice in educators and classes, most will choose those classes rated as “easy A’s” over classes that require “a lot of reading and writing” with little regard to gaining a quality education. Across the country, capitalists in political offices are trying to end liberal arts public education (except, unsurprisingly, that most useful of disciplines to ensuring the moral acceptance of existing power relations, that tool of oppression ever since Fordism/Taylorism became Industrial/Organization and John Watson sold out to marketing...psychology). An ignorant populace is an easily manipulated populace and being solely educated in the STEMs will not give students the skills necessary to critically examine culture, history, or society. Those students will have been denied the type of education necessary for moral and active social participation.

In an included interview by Jonathan Winslow, Peter McLaren calls for a critical pedagogy, with a dedication to praxis as the foundation, that situates educators as being in prime positions to expose, deconstruct, and resist harmful imperialistic, capitalistic ideologies ingrained into students by political and economic elites through the co-optation of educational institutions. Constantine Skordoulis grounds his critique of the education-industrial complex in the works on ideology of Louis Althusser and his concept of ideological state apparatuses. Both national and international pressures have led to more firmly entrenching neoliberal corporatist values into the education systems of the industrialized nations of the world. The result has been a focus on skills over knowledge. It is ironic in an information society that we teach the computer skills to amass, organize, and disseminate vast quantities of knowledges but not how to understand the knowledges. Skordoulis adds to McLaren’s call with his promotion of revolutionary critical pedagogy. This is the revolutionary politics of the working class with an emphasis on intersectionality. In a way, Skordoulis is, without direct mention, invoking Max Weber’s position that the role of the sociologist is to teach inconvenient facts or what Dave Hill refers to as ideology critique. These are facts and knowledges that problematize dominant ideologies and meaning-making strategies. The teaching of history typically ignored by primary school textbooks often serves well to undermine the neoliberal

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propaganda with which most Western students enter higher education; as does simply defining words that are so often invoked by people (politicians, media pundits, celebrities and bought-and-paid-for economists) who do not understand them (e.g., “capitalism” and “socialism” as major examples- such as Piketty’s confusion over the difference between capital and wealth).

The section on language, literature and art seems to stand out from the other sections but only at first glance. It is a collection of poetry, narratives, and an interview with documentarian Robert Greenwald. The preceding section outlines the issues of capitalist culture. Particularly insightful is Franco “Bifo” Berardi’s selection where he draws a distinction between the social mind projected into a virtual multi-verse and the individual mind still dependent on the wet, organic material of our brains. At one point in time, as pointed out by several in the Frankfurt School, it would have made no sense to draw a distinction between society and culture. How could the two ever be teased apart in any way other than just arbitrarily delineating separate categories. As cultural production came under the logic of industrial capitalism (arguably beginning in the cultural sphere with Gutenberg in the fifteenth century) and later consumer capitalism (epitomized by online marketplaces), cultural producers and consumers began to be separated in ways they never had before. Culture became not a collective form of expression but a commodity to be carefully crafted so as to appeal to the widest audience possible for the purposes of profit. Profit is primary, meaning and aesthetics an afterthought left to the wage-slaves. Cultural meaning and representation are dictated by the vagaries of the market. Without a venue for truly counter-cultural meaning, when counter-cultures can be turned into mainstream consumer items, they cease to be counter-culture (I was recently in a big box operation when I heard a punk band playing over the speakers and I have heard punk music used to sell items in commercials- the anti-aesthetic has found mainstream commodification).

The section on literature and art is about memory. Remembering the past, the present, and the future we have been promised—that we could have a future. Along the lines of Emile Zola’s *J’Accuse...!*, revolutionary art lays bare the cultural contradictions of power through representation and discursively centers the voices of marginalized people. It shines a light on the perennial lie of the status quo, ‘everything is all right; nothing to see here.’ As Walter Benjamin once wrote and I paraphrase: Fascism turns politics into art; communism turns art into politics. Berardi’s take is more pessimistic however. He argues that we have

created a kind of asymmetrical feedback loop between the mechanic transmitters of information and the organic receivers of information whose processing and evolutionary speeds will always be out of sync. He credibly links rises in mental illness and suicide in the US to this rise of technocratic social order. The push to be perfect, to be a machine; the crushing isolation and loneliness of a society that has to move so fast to stay competitive that we no longer have time for each other or ourselves. In the push for hyper-individualization characteristic of the Enlightenment Project, in the emphasis on personal responsibility and the complete denial of social responsibility, we have largely divorced the individual from the broader collective. When the collective no longer holds clear and legitimated sway over the individual and norms and social expectations become overwhelming, confusing, and contradictory, society, to use Berardi's word, collapses. Emile Durkheim called this anomie. In effect, Western neoliberal capitalism has created a society and social environment hostile to human life. Berardi's final point in this selection from a book is haunting. He points out that on an international level, Western society has become criminal in the political and economic manipulation of other countries (particularly in the Global South), the complicity of the West in profiting from slavery around the world (such as the enslaved children in India making clothing for Gap), the perpetuation of a war economy since WWII, or, to add my own contribution, the sixth mass extinction of life Earth has ever seen and the first to be caused by one of the species that evolved on Earth. Berardi concludes, "Crime is no longer a marginal function of the capitalist system but the decisive winning factor for deregulated competition. [...] Crime is best suited to the principle of competition" (203).

The diverse authors and selections in *Against Capital* collectively paint a stark picture of the world of today but that should come as no surprise to those who stay abreast of current events. The problems seem clear, the world is entering a period of profound change and humanity, if we survive it, will not be the same species afterward. I do not mean in an evolutionary sense, but a social one. Capitalists and their sycophants of all walks of life have brought us as a species careening off a cliff and corporatist media outlets would have us debate whether the cliff is real as we plummet to our extinction. UN climate scientists gave us 12 years to do something about climate change almost a year ago. Many climatologists have argued we have already passed the point of no return. If we continue as we are, we will continue to react to environmental crisis after crisis with increasing severity until our response systems are overwhelmed and collapse. If the coming climatic changes are not going

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to be the end of human society as we now recognize it, we need to start addressing the threat so that coming crises can be mitigated without us having to be simply reactionary. These are issues discussed in the section of the book on ecology and while some may see this as mere alarmism, we have been discussing climate change and the human role since the 1970's and have only increased carbon emissions and the exhaustion of natural resources since. We are running out of time and our politicians in the US are still debating about whether the threat is real. We are past the time for this to be mere alarmism—the alarm has been ringing for decades and we have ignored it.

Against Capital is a timely contribution. The articles look at the extant threats to humanity from multiple angles while maintaining a consistent understanding of the radical root of the problem in each piece: Capital itself. The proposed solutions and strategies throughout the book vary from grounded in Marxian, anarchist, and postmodern schools of thought. From building a horizontal social structure, to co-opting the means of cultural reproduction, to rejecting the notion of civilization for primitivism, to educators seizing the means of education, to outright socialistic and/or anarchist revolution, the contributors examine many possible exit ramps from our current road. Here is my concern: The global situation is deadly serious. Climatic change is the ticking clock hanging over all our heads but the global village is burning now. Fascism and White Nationalism are on the rise around the world. More leaders are becoming blazon autocrats in Russia, China, Turkey, Brazil, Italy, and the United States to just name a few. Pakistan and India are on the brink of nuclear war that would significantly speed that ticking climate change clock up. Sectarian violence, more and more people are being displaced and turned into refugees throughout Asia Minor, Central and South America, Africa, Eastern Europe, and with the Trump administration's mass deportations, North America. Gun violence and mass shootings are only increasing. Threats of war between nations and economic hostilities are intensifying. The health of younger populations in industrialized countries is in decline both in terms of physical and mental health. Suicide and drug over-doses have reached epidemic proportions in the US especially among younger generations. And we have a punitive, destructive, and alienating system focused more on control than help that serves our mental health needs— that is when we do not just lock those dealing with mental illness and/or drug addiction in prison or let our police just shoot them. I am not convinced that we have time to change cultures through subversive means or raise and educate an entirely new generation to resist the life course laid out by capital. We

have come to a point where we need to change how we relate to the world and each other now. Co-optation of existing systems or bending modern bureaucracy through policy change against the very capitalistic logics that created it as establishment thinker would have seems doubtful of success and too slow for the current realities. Several contributors in the book raise the issue of revolution by many different means some targeted and specific, others more general and encompassing. For that to work, a successful revolution would have to be waged, new social systems designed and implemented, the culture would have to legitimate those new systems, then we could finally use them to address global threats. Again, there is simply not enough time. In the end, I think of both Jürgen Habermas' and Anthony Giddens' characterizations of modernity as a juggernaut, borrowed from Hegel's view of history where we are mere victims helpless before the unfolding of the Idea, that could not be stopped and must be completed. I hope they were not right.