

Book Review: John Asimakopoulos, *The Political Economy of the Spectacle and Postmodern Caste*. Chicago: Haymarket Books. 2020. ISBN: 978-1-64259-352-5 (Paperback). 231 Pages. \$28.00.

Reviewed by Garrick B. Harden¹

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Dr. John Asimakopoulos has crafted a fascinating study into the larger debate regarding social structure within the context of postmodern culture. During the latter half of the Twentieth century and into this third decade of the Twenty-First century, there has been passionate debate across disciplines on the reality of postmodern culture. Jürgen Habermas and Jean-François Lyotard argued about modernity's continued existence with Habermas, as well as notable scholars such as Anthony Giddens, declaring modernity an "unfinished project;" and drawing from Eighteenth and Nineteenth century German Idealism, especially Georg Hegel, as a "juggernaut" and that we have no choice but to allow modernity to steamroll over anyone and everyone until it plays itself out. We have Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault debating the notion of "human nature" from Modernist and Poststructuralist (respectively) perspectives; we have the Sokal Affair when a mathematician was able to publish a joke paper in a postmodern journal deconstructing the notion of the atom. We had books telling us to "forget Foucault" or to "forget Baudrillard." Though the larger debate in academia was never resolved, few scholars discuss it now. Looking at the history of the overall debate, it would be easy to conclude that scholars ended at an impasse and that these lines of theoretical thought are intellectual dead ends.

The Political Economy of the Spectacle and Postmodern Caste, however, offers a fresh perspective; and, similar to arguments from Fredric Jameson, demonstrates how types of social structure continue even under postmodern culture. Most "classical" postmodern theorists

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rejected the possibility of structure in postmodernity. Two prominent examples are Michel Foucault, who talked about power as an amorphous thing that is fluid and constantly flowing, and Jean Baudrillard, who likened the American consumerist model to a “black hole” that breaks down the dialectic by being a thesis to which no antithesis can exist without being co-opted and transformed into more consumerism. Asimakopoulos demonstrates the breadth and depth of his theoretical and philosophical knowledge by interweaving various theoretical perspectives and schools to show how each can contribute to understanding the multidimensional social structures that do exist within postmodern cultures.

Asimakopoulos’ argument is that economic class structures and status structures combined to form caste systems in postmodernity with concrete social barriers that centralizes all opportunities, social benefits, wealth, and power within the highest caste as defined by power in economics, politics, the military, and culture and use *The Spectacle* as the main means of social control. The elite group is essentially the same as C. Wright Mills’ *Power Elite* with the important addition of culture. The major new means of social control is by defining, surveilling, and correcting everyone through the logics of *The Spectacle*. The group of elites who maintain and manipulate *The Spectacle*, which becomes a kind of independent social agent acting back on individual members of the cultures that created it as well as, at this historical moment, the rest of the world (much like social facts of historical and contemporary colonizers, or capital), are able to construct extensions to dominant ideological frameworks in realtime. Those of the highest caste are characterized intersectionally by ethno-racialized, gendered, sexualized, and economic constructs with a high degree of ideological homogeneity. Asimakopoulos concludes that those of us not in this global power elite are nearly indistinguishable from being enslaved. His argument is reminiscent of Marx’s “wage-slaves,” but Asimakopoulos comes to his conclusions by examining evidence and data from far more than just historical and economic sources.

At first glance, the peoples of the most industrialized nations would denounce the idea that they are enslaved, but the author makes a strong case. He carefully and methodically builds his argument starting with classical sociological theorists such as Max Weber and George Herbert Mead, through the Twentieth century’s major schools of thought, with an emphasis on critical theory, especially Guy Debord, to current Twenty-First century scholars. While the book has a strong social theoretical core that allows for more nuanced and sophisticated understandings of data, it

is far from being a work of “pure social theory.” Asimakopoulos gathered a broad range of empirical evidence coming from applications of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, grounding his overall argument and analyses of current postmodern caste systems in social, historical, communal, and individual narratives as well as international statistical trends. Anyone who was around for the debates on postmodernity and modernity during the 1960’s to the 2000’s would most likely do a double take on my last sentence. This is because most postmodern theorists argued that postmodern culture transcends Western scientific techniques to label and categorize everything. Postmodern theoretical concepts were supposed to be beyond categorization because of the ultimately undefinable and illogical nature of postmodernity. Then again, most, if not all, postmodern theorists have also denied being postmodern theorists.... Despite the grandeur in which “classical” postmodernists framed their theoretical constructs, Asimakopoulos convincingly operationalizes postmodern concepts and then uses scientifically gathered data to illustrate them.

The author does not simply separate society into the old dualism of the “haves” and “have nots;” he discusses systemic oppression as a matter of degrees with certain castes retaining things like ethno-racial, sexual, and gender privilege even among European-American, straight, Protestant Christian men with relatively low socio-economic statuses (to use an American example). Northwestern European nations historically laid the groundwork for the global totalitarian systems by, in part, a social result of the “Enlightenment Project.” Spacetime was disconnected from material reality and whole cultures began existing and operating almost wholly within the social imaginary. Asimakopoulos repeats the postulation that in Northwestern Europe, the peasants and serfs were the last, in that part of the world, to experience spacetime in terms of living according to the seasons, moving at the speed of human legs or those of another animal. They would have also been the last in that part of the world to organize communal life according to the various cultural festivals and celebrations instead of seeing such festivals and celebrations as times to individually tithe a large percentage of our income to the global elites (or the ideologies of consumerism in general) to decrease the possibility of descendants of peasants and enslaved peoples accruing capital, thus perpetuating relative social positions across generations, different political systems, economic systems, and societies generally.

The Political Economy of the Spectacle and Postmodern Caste explicitly concludes what others have only hinted at or implied; what

sends moderate Leftists and corporate Democrats calling out the names of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi; what those on the political economic right openly scream about to the skies and readily embrace and defend it to such extremes it becomes absurdity (such as those who argue arming fetuses would end abortion)... the only way out seems to be violence. It may be unsavory and politically incorrect, but, as the author points out, real, lasting social change, historically, has most often been achieved through violence as political discourse. Pointing out this historical tendency or, as Fredrick Douglass famously put it just before the US Civil War broke out, “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.” It is important to add, however, demands passively made are easily ignored or later overturned. There is one other option according to Asimakopoulos: We could simply embrace nihilism.

If I had been writing this review ten, maybe even five, years ago, I would have been highly critical of the author’s conclusions. I would have joined the chorus demanding non-violent solutions and would have rejected even the suggestion of embracing nihilism as being ultimately defeatist, but after *Citizens United*; after the gutting of the VRA; the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*; D. Trump’s emboldening of White Nationalists and their move into broader social legitimation and having representatives in Congress; the international rise of Neo-Nazism; the undermining of education through the “defund public education” movement beginning in Florida, but quickly spreading leading to teachers being fired, verbally and physically attacked, and even sued for daring to teach something other than pro-colonizers’ propaganda; after the number of guns in the US surpassed the number of people due to those who are stockpiling arsenals to use on the rest of us; the growing climate disasters from human caused climate change while global leaders only give lip service to it or outright deny it even exists; the intensifying fervor in which state and national politicians and regular denizens are attacking LGBTQ+ communities; after undeniable evidence of the excesses and abuses of the US CJS were forced into White America’s conscious awareness by new technologies and White Americans’ response has largely been continued denial, blaming the victims and/or survivors, swelling the ranks of hate groups and even inventing a few new hate groups, or just plain indifference; after the baby jails on the US Southern border... I am stopping here for interest of space, but this list could go on and on in this manner. For all the above reasons and more, I found myself reading the author’s conclusions and thinking to myself, “well, that seems awfully optimistic.”

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I conclude, simply, with a quote, “Mankind [*sic*], which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art.” -Walter Benjamin from “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”