

k-punk

**The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher
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not failing better, but fighting to win¹

Capitalist realism, to sum it up briefly, can be seen as both a belief and an attitude. It is a belief that capitalism is the only viable political/economic system, and a simple restatement of the old Thatcherite maxim, “There is no alternative”.

People like Paul Mason have been saying that since 2011 there has been an upsurge in global militancy, including a number of uprisings, and this represents the end of capitalist realism. But that is clearly not the case. It is true that the major crisis of capitalism from 2008 led to a situation where capital has never been weaker ideologically in my lifetime, and as a result there is widespread disaffection, but the question is why *nevertheless* capitalist realism still exists.

In my view it is because it was never really necessarily about the idea that capitalism was a particularly good system: it was more about persuading people that it is the only *viable* system and the building of an alternative is impossible. That discontent is practically universal does not change the fact that there appears to be no workable alternative to capitalism. It does not change the belief that capitalism still holds all cards and that there is nothing we can do about it — that capitalism is almost like a force of nature, which cannot be resisted. There is nothing that has happened since 2008 that has done anything to change that, and that is why capitalist realism still persists.

So capitalist realism is a belief, but it is also an attitude related to that belief — an attitude of resignation, defeatism and depression. Really then, capitalist realism, whilst it is disseminated by the neoliberal right, and very successfully so, is a pathology of the left, or elements of the so-called left, that they succumb to. It was an attitude promoted by New Labour — what was New Labour if not instantiating the values of capitalist realism?

In other words, we resign ourselves to the fact that there is no getting around capital: capital will ultimately run things, and all we can do is perhaps bolt on a couple of tethers as gestures toward social justice. But essentially ideology is over, politics is over: we are in the era of so-called post-ideology, the era of post-politics, where capital has won. This so-called “post-political” presentation by New Labour was one of the ways in which capitalist realism imposed itself in the British context.

There is a problem, however, in seeing capitalist realism *just* as a belief and an attitude, in that both are based on individual psychology. The discussion needed is one that interrogates where those beliefs and attitudes come from, for what we are actually dealing with is the social decomposition that gives rise to them. For that, we really need a narrative about the decline of solidarity and the decline of security — the neoliberal project achieved its aim of undermining them. Capitalist realism then is also a reflection of the recomposition of various forces in society. It is not just that people are persuaded of certain beliefs, but rather that the beliefs people have reflect the way that forces in society are composed in contemporary capitalism.

“Modernisation”

The decline of the unions is probably the biggest factor in the rise of capitalist realism for ordinary people. Now we find ourselves in a situation where everybody disdains bankers and finance capitalism, and the level of control that these people still hold over all of our lives. Everyone is aghast at the plunder, avoidance of tax and so forth, yet at the same time there is this sentiment that we can do nothing about it. And why has that sentiment grown so powerful? It is because there really is no agent to mediate the feelings people have and organise those people. The effect is that discontent can be widespread, but without such an agent it will remain at the level of individual disaffection.

That easily converts into depression as well, which is one of the stories I try and tell in my book, *Capitalist Realism*. I deal with the association between post-politics, post-ideology, the rise of neoliberalism and the conjoined rise of depression, particularly among young people. I call this process the “privatisation of stress”.

I do not want to hang everything on trade union decline — unions are just an example of what has been removed from the psychic and political infrastructure of people's lives over the last thirty or forty years. However, in the past, if your pay and conditions got worse, you might go to the unions and organise, whereas now we are encouraged, if, for example, stress at work increases, to see it as our own problem and deal with it as an individual.

We must deal with it through self-medication, through antidepressants, which are increasingly widely prescribed, or, if we are lucky, through therapy. But these concerns — experienced now as individual psychic pathologies — do not really have their roots in brain chemistry: they reside in the wider social field. But, because there is no longer an agent, a mediator, for a class acting collectively, there is no way of tackling that wider social field.

Another way of getting to this story is via the restructuring of capital in the late Seventies and early Eighties, the arrival of post-Fordism. That meant the increasing use of precarious conditions at work, just-in-time production, the dread word “flexibility”: we must bend to capital, no matter what capital wants; we are required to bend to it and we will bend to it. On the one hand, there was that kind of stick, but there was also at least the appearance of carrots in the Eighties: neoliberalism did not *just* hammer workers; it encouraged people no longer to identify as workers. Its success was in being able to seduce people out of that identification, and out of class consciousness.

The genius at the centre of Thatcherism could be found in the selling-off of council houses, because alongside the straightforward inducement of owning your own home was the narrative about time and history, whereby Thatcher and people like her were out to make your life more free. They were opposed to those stuck-in-the-mud, centralising bureaucrats, who want to control your life for you. That involved a very successful harnessing of the desires that had grown up, particularly since the Sixties.

Part of the problem here was the absence of a left response to post-Fordism — instead there was an attachment to the comfort of old antagonisms, you could say. We had internalised the story that there was a strong workers' movement which depended on unity. What were the conditions for that? Well, we had Fordist labour, the concentration of

workers in confined spaces, the domination of the industrial workforce by male workers, etc. The breakdown of those conditions threatened the breakdown of the workers' movement. There was the emergence of a plurality of other struggles, leading to the undermining of the common purpose that the workers' movement once possessed. But that kind of nostalgia for Fordism was actually dangerous — the failure was not that Fordism ended, but that we had no alternative vision of modernity to compete with the neoliberal account.

In fact, neoliberalism owns the word “modernisation” now. If you hear the word in news broadcasts, it is synonymous with neoliberalisation. Whenever there is a dispute — in, say, Royal Mail — the phrasing used is something like, “Royal Mail is trying to modernise, but its plans are opposed by workers”. But when they say “modernise”, they really mean “privatise” and “neoliberalise”. We saw this with Blairism: those who wanted to “modernise” really wanted to neoliberalise the Labour Party. Of course, if you are opposed to modernisation, you must be out of touch with reality and you immediately find yourself on the back foot.

The left almost seemed to believe it, and the only way to “modernise” was to make some sort of accommodation with capital. But the opposite mistake was to think that things could stay as they were before — and that was really a very dangerous line to go down. The challenge was to come up with a post-Fordist leftism — a project which was begun in the Eighties. But this soon got derailed, as any attempt to do this was seen as just folding to Blairism, even though that was not the case.

Education

There is more than just one particular zone where capitalist realism applies and most of the anecdotes and key concepts that went into the book came from my experiences teaching sixteen to nineteen-year-olds. So let us turn now to the key question of capitalist realism in education.

One of its central features in this area is “business ontology”, as I have called it, which is simply the idea that the only things that actually count, the only criteria that matter, are related to business. Within education we have seen a creeping spread of practices, language and rhetoric from business. And this has spread into teaching, into the kind of self-policing and self-surveillance teachers are now required to perform.

One of the things I try to point out in *Capitalist Realism* is the strange anomaly here: one of the things we were sold about neoliberalism was that it liberated us from bureaucracy, that it was only old Stalinists and crusty social democrats who obsess with bureaucracy. Neoliberalism was supposed to cut away the red tape. So why is it that teachers are required to perform more bureaucratic tasks than they ever were in the heyday of social democracy?

Simply because neoliberalism has got nothing to do with the freeing of markets, and everything to do with class power. That is reflected in the introduction of certain methods and strategies, ways of assessing teachers and schools, justified because they allegedly increase efficiency. Well, anyone who has engaged in this kind of, to coin another phrase, market Stalinism knows that nowadays what matters is what appears on the forms, irrespective of whether it actually corresponds to reality.

It was New Labour which accelerated this development in education by introducing targets — isn't it interesting that New Labour presented itself as the extreme antithesis of Stalinism, but it ended up reconstituting at a formal level Stalinism's really bad aspects (not that there were many good ones!). The language of planned targets has come back, like the return of the repressed.

Given that this clearly does not increase efficiency, we need to see it as a disciplinary mechanism, an ideological, ritualising system. If you are a teacher sitting at home filling in lots of forms full of quasi-business rhetoric, you are not going to teach a better lesson the next day. In fact, if you just watched TV and relaxed, you would probably be better equipped in that regard. But the authorities are not idiots: they know this; they know they are not really increasing your performance.

So what is the function of these practices? Well, one is obviously discipline and control: control via anxiety, control via the destabilisation of professional confidence. These things are framed as “continuous professional development”, and that sounds good, doesn't it? You always want to learn more, don't you? And now you always have access to training. But what it really means is that your status is never really validated — you are constantly subject to review. And it is a review of a bizarre and Kafkaesque type, because all the assessment criteria are characterised by a strategic vagueness, whereby it might appear possible to fulfil them, but in reality that fulfilment can be constantly deferred. The

result is that teachers are in a constant state of anxiety — and anxiety is highly functional from the perspective of those who want to control us.

On a second level it is merely ideological ritual, of exactly the kind that Althusser described. For him a good part of ideology is made up of ritual: you just repeat the phrases and, as Althusser says, via Pascal, “Kneel and you will believe”. That is a highly ambiguous phrase. Does it mean, “Kneel and you will believe afterwards”? Or that in the act of kneeling you already believe? I think both, but it reinforces the idea that belief is really the crucial thing about capitalism. And one of the sources of that belief is the contamination of public life and former public services by this kind of incantation and language of business. Many people regard what they are required to do at work as quite ridiculous and ask why they have to do it. Capitalist realism is confronted, as the response comes back: “Well, you know, it’s just how it is now. We don’t really believe this stuff, of course, but we just have to go along with it.”

That is all ideology really needs. You do not have to believe it in your heart of hearts: all you are required to do is act as *if* you believe it. In education this has been crucial as part of the way in which we view its purpose. Today education is to be determined by the needs of business. Of course, such a tendency has always been present, but there is almost no contesting it anymore.

Debt

There are many different dimensions to capitalist realism in education, but the other key one is debt, plainly. What is interesting is that after the phoney peace, I suppose you could call it, following 2008, where nothing really significant happened in terms of public displays of anger, the first real manifestation of discontent was the student movement of 2010.

Just before it started, I said to a friend of mine that there was going to be some expression of anger over the cuts in higher education, and he responded to the effect that that could not happen: it was just “revolutionary nostalgia” on my part. I do not tell that story to claim some special prophetic vision, but to illustrate the fact that his view had seemed to be the realistic one — there really had been no sign of such anger erupting.

But it did erupt at the end of 2010. Why was that? What was really being argued over with regard to fees? Clearly the rhetoric about paying down the debt is ludicrous, in as far as anyone can make out anything in this necromantic economics surrounding university fees. It seems that it is costing the government more to impose this new system anyway, so it has actually increased the deficit. What were they actually trying to achieve with this massive hike in fees? To me it is obvious that this is another version of the production of a certain kind of anxiety — the student population had to be constituted as debtors.

There was a good piece by Mark Bolton in the *New Left Project* arguing that debt is now the key social category in capitalism: capital does not need to work in the same way as before, but it does need us to be in debt — a main source of our subjectivity.² What is debt? It is also a capture of time, of our future. So the confrontation with university students in the UK is a dramatic example of the kind of switch-around we have seen — a struggle over the use of time.

What was university like when I went? First, I did not pay a penny in fees and, secondly, I received a maintenance grant, upon which it was possible to actually live if you were quite frugal. In other words, there was this funded time outside the frenetic activity of work. I say that because now work has changed into simply a means of paying off debt.

The article in the *New Left Project* was arguing against a ludicrous rightwing Tory book, *Britannia Unchained*, which claims that Britain had been chained up, but those chains have now been cut.³ So how are we freed as a result? We can work harder and longer — even harder than those Chinese, because we need to do a far better job of exploiting ourselves than we have up to now. But the reality of work is that it does not pay enough and that is why we are in debt.

This government has attempted to moralise debt. It is analogous to the ludicrous assertion it keeps making (the government operates in a kind of neuro-linguistic way, believing that if you repeat something often enough then it will become true) that the crisis was caused by New Labour overspending — just like an individual who has maxed out their credit cards. Of course, it was not a moral failing at all when people relied so much on their credit cards: it was unavoidable. More importantly, the entire economy now *needs* people to be in debt — they are doing their duty to capital! That duty to capital in the past is used as a new reason in

the present to exploit them further, to cut their public services and standards of living. It would be funny if it were not so grotesque. But this ridiculous personalisation of debt, as if it were a moral failing, is the meat and drink of capitalist realism.

Connected to this is the reduction in the amount of time that could be spent for purposes other than the kind of frenetic anxiety related to the world of work. That Tory book is really part of this attempt to impose such anxiety — we are not working hard enough, after all. What we have seen with the coalition government is the systematic shutting down of space where time could be used differently. This has a massive impact on culture, because it was within those spaces that any alternative culture could be produced. Many of the key developments in popular culture since the 1960s were facilitated by the space provided by the welfare state, social housing, etc. They amounted to a kind of indirect funding for cultural production. With those spaces closed down, much of the culture of late-capitalist Britain is moribund, miserable, repetitious and homogenous.

Another one of the paradoxes of capitalist realism is the hyper-regulation of learning in the classroom, so that any deviation from the official programme is closed down. When you step outside the narrow parameters of the examination drill, students themselves will complain today. They will ask, “Is this going to be in the exam?” A narrow teleological focus is what is inculcated, along with a super-instrumentalisation of education.

Of course, one of the things senior management is trying to do with the introduction of fees is to create a split between students and lecturers. As the students are paying more in fees, it is expected that they will demand more from the lecturers. Management is fairly cynically trying to get students to behave as “aggrieved consumers” who should demand more for their money, but the problem is that none of that extra money is going to the lecturers. I know of a communication from a senior manager at a higher education institution saying that, in the wake of the hike in fees, “We’d better prepare ourselves for students demanding more”. Which means that lecturers will have to work more for the same money.

In It Together?

How is it possible to impose all this? Well, only because of the general ideological atmosphere of capitalist realism. Whilst I do not agree with Paul Mason, capitalist realism has certainly changed its form compared to before 2008. Then it had a bullish quality that declared: “Either you get on board with us or you’re a sad loser who will die drinking meths in a gutter — if you’re lucky.” Since 2008, it has had a more desperate quality, which is what lies behind the ostensibly inclusive rhetoric of “We’re all in it together”. In other words, if we do not all pull together, we will all go down — rather different from the previous implication that anyone who does not come on board will just be crushed beneath the juggernaut of capital.

So the tone of capitalist realism has changed, but harsh measures have been imposed very quickly because of the absence of an alternative. In fact it is even worse than that, because the previous form of the system to which we are told there is no alternative is now impossible. There is no returning to pre-2008 capital. Capital has no idea of any solution to the crises which led up to 2008. There is no guarantee that the current crisis can be ended, because capital’s means of keeping wages low and demand up was debt itself. If you make debt harder to come by, then what is going to take its place? There is no answer to that, and plainly capital’s apologists are just flailing about.

Their only answer has been the strategy of austerity, which in large part has been based on a historical forgetting of why the welfare state was introduced. It was introduced not out of the kindness and largesse of the capitalists, but as “revolution insurance”, so that widespread discontent did not spill over into revolution. They have forgotten that, and as a consequence they think they can keep pulling away those social safety nets without any problem. Last year’s riots give us a glimpse of some of the possible repercussions.

What then can we do? Well, it is first necessary to defeat the anarchists — I am only half-joking about that. It is essential that we ask why it is that neo-anarchist ideas are so dominant amongst young people, and especially undergraduates. The blunt answer is that, although anarchist tactics are the most ineffective in attempting to defeat capital, capital has destroyed all the tactics that *were* effective, leaving this rump to propagate itself within the movement. There is an uncomfortable synergy between the rhetoric of the “big society” and a lot of the neo-anarchist ideas and concepts. For

example, one of the things which is particularly pernicious about some of the dominant ideas within anarchism at the moment is their disengagement from the mainstream.

There is the idea, for instance, that the mainstream media is an inherently corrupt monolith. The point is that it is completely corrupt, but it is *not* a monolith. It is a terrain that is effectively controlled at present by neoliberals, who took the fight over the mainstream media very seriously, and consequently won that struggle.

One of the things which I am pushing for is media consciousness-raising with some younger people — for example, Channel 4 used to have hourlong programmes featuring a debate between three philosophers. Now *Big Brother* takes up that slot. The slot once occupied by European Arts cinema is now taken by *Location, Location, Location*. If you want to look at the changes in British society, politically and culturally over the last thirty years then there is no better example than Channel 4.

Why is that? Because Channel 4 emerged as a result of all sorts of struggles within the media for control of things like film, and people took that very seriously. Alongside the labour struggles of the Eighties there were also cultural struggles. Both were defeated, but at the time it was by no means obvious that they would be. If you remember, the Eighties were the time when there were moral panics about “loony left” councils, and there was also a moral panic over Channel 4 with its politically correct lefties, who were supposedly taking over broadcasting.

That is part of what I mean by an alternative modernity — an alternative to the neoliberal “modernity”, which is actually just a return to the nineteenth century in many ways. But the idea that the mainstream culture is inherently coopted, and all we can do is withdraw from it, is deeply flawed.

The same is true about parliamentary politics. You should not pin all of your hopes on parliamentary politics, because that would be sad and ludicrous, but, at the same time, if it was pointless then you have to ask why the business class expends so many resources in subjugating parliament to its own interests.

Again, the neo-anarchist idea that the state is finished, that we do not need to participate in it at all, is deeply pernicious. It is not that parliamentary politics will achieve much on its own — the object lesson of what happens if you believe that to be the case was New Labour. Power

without hegemony — that is effectively what New Labour was. But that is pointless. You cannot hope to achieve anything through an electoral machine alone. But it is hard to see how struggles can succeed without being part of an ensemble. We have to win back the idea that it is about winning the hegemonic struggle in society on different fronts at the same time.

Because the anti-capitalist movements that have arisen since the Nineties have ultimately done nothing, they have caused capital no concern at all — it has been so easy to route around them. Part of the reason for that is the fact that they have taken place out on the street, ignoring the politics of the workplace and of the everyday. And that feels remote to ordinary working people, because at least with the unions, for all their flaws, there was a direct connection between everyday lives and politics. That connection is now missing, and anti-capitalist movements have not provided it.

Coordination

It seems to me that the crucial question now is coordination, and so many debates around centralisation versus decentralisation, top-down versus horizontal, obfuscate the real issues, which are about what is the most effective form of co-ordination against capital. Coordination does not need centralisation: in order for things to have common purpose they do not have to be centralised. We need to resist the false oppositions which come out of the way neo-anarchist ideas are narrativised.

Obviously all the anti-capitalist movements, right up to Occupy, have managed to mobilise disaffection, but they have not been able to coordinate it in a way that causes capital any long-term problems at all. What could coordinate discontent? And what could convert ambient disaffection into sustainable antagonism? It is a lack of the sustainability of these antagonisms which is part of the problem with them. Another problem with them, which my comrade, Jeremy Gilbert, has raised, is their lack of institutional memory. If you do not have something like a party structure then you do not have institutional memory, and you just end up repeating the same mistakes over and over.

There is far too much toleration of failure on our side. If I ever have to hear that Samuel Becket quote, “Try again, fail again, fail better”, I will go

mad. Why do we even think in these terms? There is no honour in failure, although there is no shame in it if you have tried to succeed. Instead of that stupid slogan we should aim to learn from our mistakes in order to succeed next time. The odds might be stacked in such a way that we do keep losing, but the point is to increase our collective intelligence. That requires, if not a party structure of the old type, then at least some kind of system of coordination and some system of memory. Capital has this, and we need it too to be able to fight back.