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J.D. TAYLOR

NEGATIVE CAPITALISM

**CYNICISM IN
THE NEOLIBERAL ERA**

Negative Capitalism

Cynicism in the Neoliberal Era

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The Argument

Each of us lives in an era where our social lives are determined by financial capital. The scale of debts owed collectively to invisible and unknown creditors is the pretext for increased demands for productivity and consumption, in exchange for vastly increasing living costs, rents, and reductions in social securities and real wages. Each of us has little agency or control over these circumstances, whilst distant banks and an aloof and privately-educated political class intensify their control and management over our everyday lives. Everything (and everyone) begins to break down under the pressure of being a productive consumer, anger and dissent are internalised, self-inflicted, erupting momentarily, whilst a discredited neoliberal political ideology and caste of financial capitalists increase their privatising enclosure of public wealth by the day. This is an era of negative capitalism, where one's individual and collective capabilities and quality of life are steadily diminished and disempowered by financial capital. This negation of individuals into economically productive behaviours represents, in the second decade of the 21st century, a new kind of era, with specific disorders (depression, anxiety), specific devices (the internet, smart-phone, and laptop) and a new cultural feeling (cynicism).

The argument here is that many singular discontents with financial capitalism can be understood within a wider process of negation, a process of disempowerment embedded in financial capitalism and primarily transmitted through a corruption of language, and hence thought. To explain this new framework, I'll outline what neoliberalism is in theory and practice, what I mean by negative capitalism, and how this analysis fits into existing accounts of capitalism, before using the bulk of the work to explore specific symptoms of negativity and the peculiar cynicism of the contemporary era. There is no "we" here. No "should"s or "would"s. I won't insult the reader's intelligence by claiming that there's a coming change on the horizon, if everyone waits a little longer, or that there's a magical solution here that's never been considered before, a cipher that when uttered transforms everything irredeemably anew. I am 24 years old, a worker and 'a graduate without a

future’, and I do not write from a position of academic, social or political privilege: my only stake in financial capitalism is a five figure debt. I am profoundly angry and depressed by what I see around me, but I am also hopeful that a new era can be created by this generation, provided the blurry errors of history, cynicism and individualism can be traded in for strategy and a new social democracy, underlined by a revolution of citizens in law and constitution.

This work differs from other recent analyses, which have often focused on one singular aspect of late capitalism, by offering an overarching framework for understanding the problems of the contemporary era in terms of ‘negation’ –a collective disempowerment of the public by financial capitalism. It goes ahead and describes specific strategies to challenge negative capitalism and create a counter-politic of social democracy. I make this kind of incautious and bold analysis in order to foment public debate regarding strategy. There is an abundance of nuanced and theoretically subtle arguments that fail to engage an enraged socially-democratic public on its own terms. Therefore this work aims to challenge both the informed reader and the new reader of political philosophy. The work aims to detail the scale of the problem: negative capitalism and its existential costs, and the cultural effects of cynicism. Rather than reel off just a utopian fairy-world of *what* and *why*, the intention here is to focus additionally on *how*, on strategy. I do not claim to know how exactly we all should live, or that ‘we all’ (assuming that all of you already agree with me, another conceit to avoid) should act or behave in one way or another. The aim is to stimulate response with a series of wild, occasionally arrogant and deliberately inflammatory arguments. The argument does offer a solution to the problems of negative capitalism –what is described here as social democracy –but this concept is offered to provoke discussion above all else. Cynical passivity is the problem. Nothing less than a basic quality of life is the prize and the end.

1

What is Negative Capitalism?

When was the last time you had a couple of days of just relaxation, without the pretext of a holiday, which didn't involve checking emails, buying things, or guiltily trying to catch up with undernourished relationships? When did you last get through a month without having to borrow even more money so that you could actually eat, meet your rent payment and afford public transport? Can you recall the last Monday or Tuesday you got through where you didn't at one point experience a feeling of fairly moderate terror and anxiety during the daily email bombardment? In an era of negative capitalism, life itself becomes negated and alienated from its sources of happiness and social support. Relaxation is accompanied by guilt. Debt becomes a social and political condition.

Since 2010 the political terrain of the UK has irreversibly shifted, hence the necessity of writing about these problems now under a wider conceptual framework of negation. Anger against the capitalist Real has erupted with small but symbolically powerful successes. Many working-class and 'underclass' young people in British urban areas have demonstrated that they feel they have no stake in their communities, demonstrated in the violence inflicted on their own alienated communities and on colonising chainstores during the August 2011 riots. Meanwhile young middle-class graduates have been similarly disinherited by the lack of any real forms of sustainable employment in the country, with similarly abortive strikes of anger against police, parliament university authorities in a continued wave of local and national actions since 2010. In the second decade of the 21st century, pain, depression and rage in urban communities is tangible. Yet the neoliberal project of privatising public wealth has accelerated to include healthcare, education and the police-force, leaving perhaps only the armed forces and judiciary acting only in the apparent interests of the 'public'. So why hasn't all this deprivation, cuts and growing inequality, in the face of an increasingly arrogant financial culture in the City, not led to a violent overthrow of the political class, or even any nascent organised oppositional movement?

Back in 2009, Mark Fisher persuasively argued in *Capitalist Realism* that the Left needed to overturn popular consent to Capital via a Spinozean return to setting out and determining, in a firm paternalistic manner, the general will of the public. It required the creation of a strange new being straight out of the blog of a postgraduate doleite or a worker's depressive convalescence, a Marxist Supernanny:

The Marxist Supernanny would not only be the one who laid down limitations, who acted in our own interests when we are incapable of recognizing them ourselves, but also the one prepared to take this kind of risk, to wager on the strange and our appetite for it.¹

The flattening of desire into a passive anhedonia and the loss of political agency into reflexive impotence could be overturned through a return to the state, subordinating it to the 'general will' of the public. Back then, the credit crisis had discredited neoliberalism as a model though not defeated it: vast amounts of public money had entered private hands, the collapse of financial capital 'unthinkable'. Fisher's powerful argument back then was that the Left could only compete with Capital by offering an optimistic counter-narrative, one that abandoned the 'ideological rubble' of history with clear promises of reduced bureaucracy and worker autonomy.

In 2012 and 2013, the burden of neoliberalism's costs is clearer –living costs have markedly increased in the last five years, and with that levels of unemployment, homelessness, poverty, and dissatisfaction. The existing functions of the state are increasingly redundant : examples such as the 2009 MPs Parliamentary Expenses Scandal, or the 2011 News International phone-hacking scandal, or the as-yet publicly withheld Motorman files, all reveal the routine lawbreaking, corruption and collusion of elected politicians, police, media proprietors and news editors; whilst key functions of civil society like healthcare, education, housing and policing are becoming privatised and irreversibly damaged by an ineffective and hostile 'Big Society' model. Fisher repeatedly targets Capital itself, but this gives a disparate series of institutions, buildings, individuals and duplicitous agreements an intimidating abstract power. Alternatively, the apparatuses of power that oppress people collectively can be grasped within the effects of 'negativity', administered by a network of financial capitalists, influenced by neoliberal theory, and possessed by a charmless psychotic cynicism that speaks only of the individual. To generate strategies that can be localised and graspable, perhaps rather than state-building as a united left, groups might come together,

educate and inspire each other, agree targets and demands, highlight and where possible peacefully disrupt the institutions of financial capital –its internet networks, power-sources, transport networks, stock exchanges –with the intention of breaking passive consent and challenging its hegemony. Disobedience excites and inspires citizens to challenge each other’s thinking – what are we doing, what do we want? But at present there is no clear prospect of any counter-political response to financial capitalism, which itself represents a new state of defeat or dormancy, depending on one’s capacity for strategic optimism.

This is an era of meltdown, apparently; but beyond the liquefaction of the global financial economy, the real alchemy occurs in turning pensions, schools, and contracts into freefloating, individualised nothingness. Negation isn’t a new phenomena, but a relation of power. Applying it to capitalism maps a specific relation to our time based around social and existential diminishment, providing a tidemark from which an atavistic and powerful anger might emerge. If this work seems like little more than another familiar left-leaning cultural studies polemic, reiterating all that is already known, then ask yourself, for how much longer can you hold out clutching onto what little you have? Struggles have stumbled into inactivity; today one is surrounded by somnambulist armies of depressed citizenry, one’s intelligence and imagination rarely exercised beyond videogames and Facebook; how much longer can you proceed with the sham that you yourself are different, the special case? How can one call oneself a communist or a socialist, even a democrat, yet patently fail then to enact the necessary strategies and actions of these convictions? The delusion of the individual is the last refuge of the negated. When does the superior intelligence of the collectivity realise itself? When is mild indignation sublimated into real atavistic anger?

Scavenging among ruins where nothing is offered to everyone. The future itself as the closing down sale of a burnt-out 99p store, wild investors called Seb and Giles tearing around inside on stolen mobility scooters. Clipped conversations, looped beats, twisted tales of old school mates or London’s male suicide rate. Thwarted attempts to leave the capital. Determined to begin again, anew, entirely. On one south London living room wall the words of James Connolly: ‘the great appear great to us only because we are on our knees: let us rise’. The black and the gold of well-beat nocturnal streets. Answers emerging on the tip of the lip, etched inside eyelids.

Whilst some of the problems of the contemporary era might not be ended with the demise of the financial institutions, they are the discredited caste of

an irrational age, and can be swept away. The credit crisis of 2008 has led to a profound global depression and decline in living standards for the majority of human life, those who did not cause and who have not benefited before or since the manipulation of credit, but whose lives have been effectively colonised by debt, the tribute of future earnings to banking institutions. The progressivism of historical materialism, that humans can collectively act for their good, is easily suspect: our peers are easily manipulated by hot words, persuaded by their bellies as much as the limits of their rational understanding. We are equally dependent and bored by the 'miracle, mystery and authority' that legitimises financial capitalism, as meted out by an regressive cabal of flabby bankers, corrupt politicians and manically-egotistical media owners. Change needs to be determined by charismatic working-class leaders who engage the public, not the academics, with strategic and universal demands that can be protected by new laws and a constitution, militating against the threat of fascism and authoritarianism. If negation is a state of disempowerment of the democracy by a capitalist oligarchy, then power can only be reasserted and retaken by the actions of the democracy and its representatives. It is no easy struggle.

Even though there is no simple solution, there are strategies within grasp that might replace our negative habits acquired under capitalism with new and more organic ones. There is no evidence of a pure or essential natural life that each of us might regain after capitalism; nor is there evidence that human beings will always in every circumstance rationally determine to cooperate peacefully for the 'good': these are two mistaken assumptions socialism has made in the past about human history which are the effects of a monotheistic religious perspective. Neither is human history necessarily 'bad': the point is to understand the nuanced and complex nature of human life, and from this develop strategies for the positive new development of societies by education, democracy, and law. Industrial capitalism has, from its origins in the slavery of cotton plantations and the urban workhouse, been aggressively motivated by the end of private profit and the accumulation of wealth by property-owners, at the expense of workers' lives, health, and natural environments. The private profit motive is intrinsically selfish and destructive of others in its competition. Whilst economically it may seem sustainable, at least to those who succeed and for whom histories are written about, as a social model it injects a violence and aggressive competition into everyday life.

Neoliberalism is the political model of financial capitalism and represents

the current political and economic consensus of leaders in Europe, China, and the West. It is an economic argument that unregulated financial trade is the best model for a self-sustaining and meritocratic economy. Whilst it is debatable how fundamentally violent, competitive, or power-seeking human life is, rather than working towards a cooperative and regulated social democracy as I will argue for, declaring capitalism as the best basis for a developed society is dangerously destructive, crisis-ridden, and ultimately fascistic. Capitalism intrinsically negates individual and collective capacity for equal political representation, social rights, and quality of life, given that its base assumption is that the value of life is determined by its success in individually accumulating and trading wealth. The more powerful capitalism is –that is, the more wealth can be observed to be concentrated in the hands of a very small cabal of effective capitalists –the less the lives of individuals and communities on low-incomes matter. There is no ‘good’ capitalism, and the system is by no means in a state of crisis, unless perhaps its sustainability is threatened by the growing anger of social democratic revolt across the globe.

Just as there is no positive capitalism, making an old argument for something seemingly opposite like communism is also pretty suspect. Such an idealistic system is very difficult to establish in practice without resorting to totalitarian measures to ensure its own security from war by external capitalist states, worried about unrest in their own impoverished populations. Instead, a more practical strategy for social transformation is cooperative social democracy, whereby private profit and private property is rendered irrational and illegal, and all things are owned and managed by democratic workers’ associations, housing associations, and so on. Social democracy could instead incentivise workers and citizens to develop their workplaces and communities with an appeal to wellbeing, civic responsibility and collective security and happiness. Rather than sulkily waiting for the end of history to level financial capitalism, the opponents of neoliberalism need to start learning from current elites and develop strategies that encourage workers to want to overthrow financial capital. Arguments about its inevitable demise are insufficient. Equal rights and responsibilities need to be legally guaranteed, including access to a living basic wage, shelter, education, healthcare, and employment, being legally-based rights for citizens in a social contract guaranteed by a secular civil constitution. Rights need to be accompanied by responsibilities too, such as the establishment and participation in local and state civil activities and decision-making, observing

intelligent compassion and concern for others, and a basic amount of peer-support, training, education, and community work for others in one's locality. These might feel less of a burden in such a social democracy where full employment is guaranteed, meaning that one's hours of productive work would be individually far less than they are currently, where despite the high amount of unemployment, workers are continuously demanded to be more productive in their jobs. Social democracy could celebrate and develop scientific research and cultural activity and production, a key basis of its economy that young people can lead, and could use sustainable and advanced technologies within a Keynesian social framework that pushes tax expenditure into construction and development of infrastructure, local energy production and domestic manufacture, making local areas self-sustaining and therefore more impervious to trade, the archaic basis of the 'middle-man', greed – financial capitalism. In the final case, the aim of social democracy is the creation of an educated and relaxed democratic body, that discuss and vote collectively in their millions for the future of themselves and their communities.

Financial capital introduces an additional sphere of the negative into everyday life. Negativity presents a new means of describing contemporary neoliberal capitalism, a financial being based on control and a fundamental negation of its own presence and time –its *immateriality*, *non-places*, precarity, and time-space compression; the fixed subjectivity and wealth of the nation-state undone by the dark financial algorithms of Capital. Even capitalist time is negated finally as market decisions are made by stock exchange algorithms at preternatural speeds, whilst the market for 'futures' means that experiential time is itself commodified. This negation of time and space has generated a specific kind of anxiety, reflected in increasing anxiety disorders as well as increasing psychological and social breakdowns. Negative capitalism links declining childbirth, relationship instability and malfunctioning families to the increasing demands of total productivity of life by capital. Everything and everyone are plunged into uncertainty, doubt and the inability to grasp essences and an overall sense of things. Its promise of increased speeds and new pleasures comes at the expense of analogue mediums and fixed certainties.

Debt is owed nowhere and to no-one: where exactly is financial capital? Since 1971 there has been no physical grounding for money, and the means in which central banks manage national economies involves less lateral trade and more esoteric mechanisms like recent 'quantitative easing' for instance,

where money is created to stimulate economic growth. The unreality of money isn't significant: the way that banks manage an equilibrium of economies through their own purchasing power is more sinister, and despite the continual cycle of crisis in neoliberal capitalism, a far more stable equilibrium has operated, as central banks have acquired greater and greater social resources through state sell-offs of public assets. Financial markets now trade in digits, assets, shares and futures, goods that often do not exist, but on which the fortunes of states, pension-funds, and communities are based. Whilst financial trade may not trade in actual goods, just like the semantically-meaningless language of contemporary politicians examined later, its trade and production of wealth has very real and specific political purposes. Financial capitalism encloses, trades and in its process abstracts publicly-produced wealth into a universal language of financial capital, an abstract code of currency that is privately and competitively traded, motivated by profit and bonuses, which in turn drives capital into a smaller and smaller share of ownership. Its purpose is the maintenance and propagation of itself.

Within the last forty years capitalism has accelerated its extent and permeation of everyday life. Fashion, ideas, and values about the 'self' and beauty, and the techniques and quality of media have been transformed by consumerism, the new social contract of post-World War Two states ("I buy X book, music, clothes, electronic item, therefore I am"). Work in the West has transformed from the factory or family home to the wireless office and internet café, increasingly abstract and knowledge-based with hours of productivity also increasing. Families and relationships break down quicker, workers are more rootless and ready to move to other geographic areas. The public sector has largely been hollowed out and replaced with a part-privatised façade awaiting demolition. There is countless evidence suggesting a more fundamental shift in the social and economic basis of Western societies rather than just simply the passage of a few decades. Locating a specific event that identifies when the neoliberal era began is more difficult.

Was it back in May 1990, when Gilles Deleuze announced that techniques of power had fundamentally changed, through the collapse of traditional institutions like work, media, and the family, subject to profound changes over the last forty years? Or 15 August 1971, when US president Richard Nixon quit the Bretton Woods agreement and allowed the dollar to become a free-floating financial currency, no longer anchored to the gold standard, marking the beginning of unregulated financial capitalism on a systemic level? If this is too long ago for the contemporary short-circuiting memory,

then was it from 1991, when Tim Berners-Lee created hypertext and the world-wide web, that by the end of that decade had already become the most important social medium since TV? Or was it 18 July 2000, with the first broadcast of the UK series of *Big Brother* initiating a new cultural perspective of distorted reality narcissism, popular entertainment provided by CCTV cameras and the apparent zaniness of contestants? *Big Brother* indicated a transformation in the way individuals represented themselves socially, becoming themselves objects and agents of 'reality' media, recording their private intimacies like one's very thoughts or bedroom photography into global digitised information via new internet social networks. Perhaps the change is more recent, say 29 June 2007, with the first release of Apple's iPhone. Again, another social technology that transformed entirely the way the world was represented, listed and engaged with, a new world mediated by lists, logos and memos, a perspective increasingly permeating into everyday working life.

But the transformation to neoliberal capitalism, a negative capitalism, has been a process of political and economic decisions and their implementation over the last forty years, not an event. The cultural and social changes outlined above are all characteristics of the neoliberal era. Life in the UK and US has become gradually negated, compressed, sped-up, and denied. Societies are forced into decline by economic demands for increased productivity, with power abstracted into the digital currency of financial capital, possessed by an invisible government of a financial and political elite. They distort the political process, acquiring media and hence the means of representing societies, and political power through funding and lobbying and hence the means of transforming societies. The basis of managing populations, the art of government, becomes no longer a social but an economic principle.

Living in an era of negative capitalism is far less empowering than any grand summary of the era could suggest. Experiences are intensive, exhausting, continuously connected –boring and anxious in equal measure. Working at any available place or waking hour. Pressure collision, further deprivation necessary: an extra push here, crunch-time there, a freeze in wages. Knowing no-one, being certain of nil. Forced into an ironical and cynical nihilism by political and social shifts over the last forty years that have seen the social contract of modernity shredded, with welfare and a stable wage in exchange for work long gone as financial capitalism and economic production become the sole ideals of a society built on crisis, impervious to collapse through the neatness of its own brutal techniques of

power and the vapid homogeneity of its rulers. A vote at the ballot box or attempting to live a meaningful life outside of corrupt and hostile political and economic intervention is a joke, a tawdry fantasy. There is an underground resistance to all this: black humour, casual violence, DIY pornography, alcohol or antidepressant dependency, and above all, cynicism. The primary language of the world has shifted from a religious and imperial language to a financial one. The evidence of negative capitalism is both external and internal, equally measured by the increasing amount of time taken off sick, stressed, or depressed. To feel like nothing: negated, denied, disenfranchised, one's worth assessed by the sum total of data surrounding one's names and appropriate numbers. Without sex, soul, or heart. No longer even labour, work increasingly unpaid or underpaid.

What ever became of you and me, honey? Analytic and text-'heavy' accounts of today's state of play like this are anachronism. Can *Negative Capitalism* be reduced to one screen, to one list, to a set amount of characters? The reduction in attention span is an old lament: Georg Simmel grumbled in 1903 about the blasé metropolitan mindset that by necessity of survival must exclude most sensory impressions to avoid urban neuronal overload. What has changed in the last forty years is the ontological status of the human. A language of citizenship, which connoted being a worker, having values and duties, a certain fixity in status, a stake in political processes by voting and engaging in local government, of having a stake in cultural processes by taking responsibility for one's own personal religious and educational development, and a certain responsibility in social life by actively engaging with local community processes. This has shifted to the status of the consumer, recalled immediately in the language of education, social services and healthcare, where as 'clients' and 'customers' the modern citizen is offered a fundamentally redundant 'choice' that 'empowers' with its 'fairness' to select from a shrinking range of privatised non-options. The modern individual is now a customer, rather than a citizen of the public. The modern citizen is free to borrow from banks and to spend and this is her/his lot and responsibility, the extent of the social contract in contemporary capitalism. It no longer requires a signature or opinion as mark of consent, but a pin code.

The casual alcohol and light drug dependency, occasional self-harm, be it public or private, of one's mid-to-late teens is now traded in for mega-debt levels, being skint and out of time, always a little bit too late. Frenzied working and, in between that, friends rarely seen. The laptop screen is the window through which a continuously awake and alert world bombards our

neurons with to-do emails, Viagra spam, narcissism, rolling catastrophes, and DIY porn. This ontological shift in the status of the human is one of the essential reasons for the profound sense of malaise and depression one feels in young adults today. This way of living simply isn't enough, and when one either cannot or chooses not to behave simply as customers, or interact with the world using advertising logos and applications, anger and frustration increases. And there is no longer any process or means of expressing our discontent or our collective intelligence and desire to transform the future.

My experiences and those around me tell the same thing: lives are getting faster, harder, more impoverished, depressed, and disenfranchised. This isn't inevitable, and it certainly shouldn't be acceptable, even if at present many continue to consent to the dreariness of everyday life because of a lack of credible alternatives. But the support and ideas that sustained those in the past to think beyond themselves are receding –political utopianism, social democracy, even the more problematic Victorian notion of 'public' in its libraries and parks are all in decline. The cultivated self has been traded in for the consumer-demographic individual. Online profiles, video games, and other kinds of recorded data have abstracted the self into individual data. Alternative spaces of reflection, the sacred or the profane, that might instil a feeling of empowerment through religious or political awe are disappearing. Food is the final object empowered with superstitious notions that might fundamentally alter our essence. Count the calories. As the tides of history recede some stragglers use their day-off to prospect for evidence of a missing future, possible but not at this moment, not for us at least. Our negation and alienation by financial capital extends to all aspects of our personal lives, whose value and fixity is seemingly in its capacity for productive output. Exhausted and fed up, the touch of a lover feels like a trespass of tensed-up skin, friends go unseen for months, one is barely capable of looking after even oneself in a bedsit and a meal for one.

Describing all this within one relation of 'negativity' is intentionally overambitious, but the originality and necessity of making this argument is that it acknowledges that each of us do not know all the answers; that indeterminacy, doubt and unfixed status are the only definitive status of contemporary experience; that insecurity is a political condition, one that like poverty can be left behind through collective revenge and violent strategic activity. It may seem that there are too many chaotic and contrary forces across the world to suggest one overarching and singular descriptive framework like 'negation' –even a term like 'system' seems tenuous, implying

that a single and stable network of relations exists between all individuals, as if everybody could all share one language, one culture, or one standard mode of behaviour. But all life has been linked together and permeated by one universal relation, something which has entirely made and defined our sense of reality, be it in psychological terms, social terms, cultural, economic or other –organised capital. All forces are globally engaged in a single language expressed in the trade of shares, commodities, bonds, properties, resources, hours, and votes. These have been exchanged often by a small number of stable currencies with one overarching and universal currency. For the first half of the 20th century, this was British pound sterling; in the latter half, the US Dollar. Capital is now the shared language of all political and economic forces, the base language of life. Capital has enclosed all aspects of life, so that even the unknown, the imagined and the theological –all that was unthinkable to previous eras –can be measured within the language of money. Opportunities to escape financial Capital’s enclosure of reality have on the whole disappeared. The wild and the weird are endangered, partitioned off into poverty or mined into for hipster marketing strategies.

Forces within neoliberal capitalism seek their own continued existence and self-perpetuation, in keeping with genetic and cultural imperatives throughout human history. In industry, the drive for factory and business owners to increase their wealth by maximising profit –by reducing labour costs and increasing or refining modes of production through industrial techniques –is called capitalism. Business and factory owners generate profit through the manipulation of their capital: the possession of labour, workers; the private ownership of the means of production –factories, mines, and so on; using increasing scales of machinery, factory, quantities of workers to forcibly organise social life around the factory. Finally, the capitalist would receive a great deal more of the wealth return of the product than any of the workers. This organisation of social and political life around economic production has determined the lives of our grandparents and parents, establishing economic production as the principle activity and active principle of human societies in the West.

What has transformed in the last fifteen years is the means in which capital operates. The factories and mines have largely closed down, as have the industrial-scale public services and bureaucracies that existed around them. This isn’t disappearing –it’s simply shifted to cheaper sites in China and India. The heavy regulation of social life has also seemingly waned. Divorce, diversity and creativity are now clichés of our era. Working hours and sites of

labour have melted into the home laptop and any public place with Wi-Fi internet. New cottage/bedsit industries are emerging in marketing and graphic design. In turn, capital has become increasingly productive. Whilst the public finances of nation-states stagnate into further debt and tax breaks, private corporations and their extremely high-paid CEOs are increasing their returns. The costs of production continue to shrink: for labour, workers are replaced with interns, wages are frozen and pension schemes cancelled; for production, overheads are reduced as desks are sold and factories, shops and offices closed down. Economic production becomes abstracted to online computer-based exchange. Unlike the factory, the computer and one's work emails are open and available at all hours. The traditional definition of 9-5 disappears, as managers are driven by *their* managers to drive workers to increased productivity, resulting in longer working hours, carried out often furtively in one's spare time. Increasing stress, depression and anxiety are the existential cost of this aggressive speed-up of capitalism.

In the West, capitalism described how wealth-owners and traders generated wealth privately. Increasing labour forces in turn organised themselves into trade unions, and demanded a fairer share in the profits of their own produce, political representation, equal employment rights, and a basic quality of life – meted out in welfare, pensions, annual paid holiday and so on. This conflict, predicted by Karl Marx as an inevitable internal implosion of capitalism that would lead to communism, instigated widespread social upheaval across the 20th century, in trade union disputes, race riots, and countercultural movements. Capitalists sought to increase their wealth-generation without the cost of labour or the threat of withdrawn labour. From the early 20th century onwards, political economists like Friedrich Hayek considered how capitalism could respond to the threat of organised communism in the form of the Soviet Union, as well as strong internal currents of dissent within the West. Neoliberalism became an idea where capitalists could overpower democratically-elected sovereign governments – sometimes composed of or responding to these socialist movements – by using unregulated financial exchange to determine the economic modes of production. This might seem like a removal of politics from economics then – surely deregulation meant that business could exist ‘naturally’, in an idyllic state free of the taint of political corruption? Instead neoliberalism became primarily a political gesture, led by politicians as a strategy to acquire full control over the conditions of labour. A pretty important gesture during an era of increasing trade unionism and independent thinking.

Political groups became disempowered by being unable to manage or regulate financial trade, which now determines as a single language most, if not all, human relations –a tentative claim in 1971, but a dreary but blatant conclusion after reading any newspaper forty years on. As political groups lost real economic power beyond tax-collection, capitalists could continue to fund political parties with donations in exchange for a say in policy or decision-making. Private funding and lobbying has also allowed sympathetic politicians to reach power, or reach a far wider media coverage, as the political cultures and classes of the US and UK demonstrate in cases like Rupert Murdoch, the Mittal scandals with Peter Mandelson, and many others.

Capitalists solved the irritating problem of labour: workers would have to train themselves, behave as what neoliberal theorists and management gurus call ‘human capital’, and perform as ‘human resources’ within their increasingly homogeneous organisations. A deregulation of pension and labour rights dreamt of by Reagan and Thatcher during the 1980s, but carried out with far more efficacy by Bush and Blair in the 2000s, achieved the desired management of labour. A more effectively managed labour force results in greater increases in profit-making, if not productivity. Stable employment, union representation, contractual working rights, paid sick leave and pensions become expensive ‘luxuries’ that politicians managed to opt workers out of, largely through additional legislative regulation. The irony is that whilst financial trade was deregulated from the 1970s to the present across the West, labour has been increasingly regulated. Increasing unemployment and underemployment has led to a gratitude complex where longer hours and more debasing tasks are lapped up with paranoiac relish. I must justify my position. If I stop working, the world might end.

Stress, anxiety and depression have risen across the capitalist world in response to this intensifying economic politic of capitalism. The World Health Authority now estimate that by 2020 depression will be the second biggest disease burden across the globe, whilst one third of all deaths by adults aged 15-44 across the world are suicides.² This isn’t just a charity’s Armageddon image of damaged refugees in some African state or ruined region of Afghanistan either. In London, suicide and deaths of undetermined intent are the single biggest killer of young men –119 in 2010, and likely to rise –more than both violent assault or road traffic accidents put together.³ Young people are living through the contradictions of this economic politic and now carry the scars and bruised knuckles of boredom, debt, unemployment, lack of shelter, having too many pressures to have happy relationships, or few places

of support or community to now draw on. They have nothing. No commons to draw on. No cause to champion, no nation or national team to support (the cultural impact of neoliberalism and the pursuit of money above all else is clearly visible in the decline of British football over the last thirty years into Sky TV, mediocre and overpaid players, and overpriced, underwhelming matches). Even the future, that pasture of the American dream and countless others, has been deleted or postponed into infinite abeyance. As Kafka puts it, there is 'plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope –but not for us'.⁴ A five or six-figure debt will take decades to repay.

Quality of life is something anyone interested in happiness will desire. A truism of course, but let's unravel how quality of life operates. This involves, as philosophers and psychologists have variously explained, shelter, access to clean water and food, a peaceful and stable society, a sufficient distribution of roles or employment, health, friendship/altruism, and opportunities for education, religion and culture for self-fulfilment and relaxation. Quality of life is largely denied by the economic politic of neoliberal capitalism, as the single drive to increase wealth privately causes ecological, social and political damage –holes in the O-zone layer, increased poverty and unemployment, political destabilisation and irrelevance of democratic government. Quality of life should then become the point at which the subject of change is broached. Why? Capitalism certainly cannot guarantee a quality of life to the majority of the world's peoples. Evidence of economic and ecological exploitation clearly suggests that industrialised capitalism disadvantages and damages the mass of humanity.

One might then respond by asking: what's the alternative? There isn't an alternative. There cannot be an opt-out or exile from capitalism. The logic of economic enclosure of all life into abstracted capital means that all alternative spaces will eventually become commodified –think of the early 1970s counterculture, or the entrepreneurial development of black American hip hop from its initial social anger. Dissent at just a cultural level is safely self-nullifying to the financial power and arrogance of neoliberal governments. Instead of thinking about an alternative, there needs to be a decisive and determined move towards transforming life around us, and this has to be done on the level at which control and negation occurs –the political and the economic. This might use the language of quality of life and rational government to generate a new, regulated and global system of social democracy. The trade of resources and production would continue, channelled in a far more technologically and socially sustainable way.