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# Seeing Is Believing: on the Visibility of Late Capitalism

## Fredric Jameson. Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One. London: Verso, 2011. pp. 158.

## Toscano, Alberto and Jeff Kinkle. Cartographies of the Absolute. Winchester: Zero Books, 2015. pp. 296.

Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One opens with the claim that “It should not be surprising that Marx remains as inexhaustible as capital itself, and that with every adaptation or mutation of the latter his texts and his thought resonate in new ways and with fresh accents … rich with new meanings” (Jameson 1). Together with Valences of the Dialectic (2009), this is Fredric Jameson's latest chapter in a life-long project of actualization and affirmation of different categories of Marx’s dialectic, from alienation to commodity fetishism, all thoroughly criticized and somewhat abandoned after the (post)structuralist turn of Marxism in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

By positing the category of representation in the center of his reading of Capital, Jameson is moving against the current of those appropriations of Marx that amidst the unprecedented global financial crisis of 2008, aimed to find their foothold in the supposed objectivity of the economy – projecting onto the economy the authenticity and the absoluteness of the Lacanian real. Having in mind his previous work, this is not something undertaken without a sense of self-responsibility, taking the form of admission when he writes that “the problem of representation today eats away at all the established disciplines like a virus, particularly destabilizing the dimension of language, reference and expression …, as well as that of thought” (Jameson 4). Rejecting the “false” debates around the (non)political nature of Marx’s magnum opus, Jameson claims that it is a figural work

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since by using different forms of value, space, time, and mediation, it ends up constructing a kind of 'proto-narrative' representation of capitalism as totality. Famous images scattered throughout Capital – capital as 'vampire' and other forms of recurring monstrosities, dancing tables or the play for recognition between the linen and the coat – are a way to grasp the specific form of capitalist reality which in appearance is neither true nor false but rather 'objective illusion'. And yet concepts that aim to grasp this eluding totality – including the very term 'capitalism' – can rarely be found in Capital. This leads Jameson to conclude that Marx, after a well-documented laborious reworking of the opening chapters and the overall structure of Capital, found out that the accumulation of capital can be made visible only in its symptoms, distortions, crisis, and different cuts of structure. This return to the now famous Slavoj Žižek proposition that "Marx invented the symptom" (Žižek 1) is followed up with an even more far-reaching conclusion: the only possible Marxian totality of capitalism has a Freudian structure and is a result of a combination of different but ultimately partial representations unable to fully capture its field of phenomena. Jameson himself is unwilling to follow up the full implication of this parallel; insofar as Marxian capitalist totality can only be an aesthetic construct – or, to use psychoanalytic vocabulary, a 'compromise formation' – built for strategic purposes, it remains just one amongst other totalities, competing with them in a terrain not overdetermined by any recourse to economic objectivity. In order to avoid this, Jameson takes the road of Marx's dialectic which for him resolves the duality of objectivism – economic determinism – and voluntarism underlying the whole history of Marxist theory. In actualizing Marx's dialectics, Jameson is not returning to the mystic source itself as much as reading Marx via and alongside the likes of Althusser or Deleuze and other "unwilling" dialecticians he recruits along the way. At the same time, once more taking a jab at structuralist theory – claiming, for example, that one can mistake the structuralist notion of the synchronic for 'conceptual ideology' relating to the eternal present of capitalist accumulation – for Jameson, structuralist discourse by itself is unable to grasp the fundamental duality of Capital, that between thinking of capitalism in structural and in historicist terms. This duality can be exclusively addressed by an anti-metaphysical dialectic that deals not with concepts but with singular historical situations, withdrawing itself from thinking in the abstract. Only then can the dialectic abstain from a presupposed 'mythic synthesis' in favor of an incessant production of contradictions, itself simulating "uneven, disproportionate and unharmonious capitalist growth" (Mandel 79). According to Jameson, dialectics and contradiction

are indispensable for building a systemic discourse which necessarily includes negativity as a part which enables a position from which the capitalist mode of production emerges in its precarious totality. But it is when Jameson moves to the analysis of Capital itself that this dialectical method opens up the way in which both representation and economy can be thought of together, redefining the specific nature of capitalist reality as "objective illusion." In the first two chapters of the book, Jameson deals with Marx's central problematic, the production of capital. Starting Capital by way of the market and exchange, Marx introduces the opposition between use (UV) and exchange value (EV), whose transfiguration into different oppositions – quantity and quality, production and exchange, constant and variable capital, labor and financial theory of value, substance and relation, space and time, materiality and spirituality, body and soul etc. – will form a central duality underlining the entire scope of Capital. By attempting to solve one deadlock, Marx dialectically transfigures it on another level of representation. While Part I of Capital deals with the critique of a "metaphysical principle of equivalence" in the form of market and money, both mediations that aim to provide a paradoxical form of "collectivity" to capitalism (16), in Part II Marx abandons this issue and sets out to resolve the mystery of surplus value in production. Already at the start of his book, Jameson sets forth his central claim: the crucial part of Capital, the infamous "general law of capitalist accumulation," deals not with work but with non-work, an immense and growing unproductive army of non-laborers brought about by the accumulation of capital itself. Marx's "dialectic of the unity of prosperity and misery" (Jameson 125) anticipates the crucial critical points of today's globalized capitalist economy whose sole obstacle to infinite enlargement is the possibility of discontinuing the production of its own contradictions. In Chapter III and IV Jameson deals with a paradox between Marx's attempt to provide his readers with the structure of capital while continuously being "haunted by temporality which breaks through decisive moments at the same time that it poses the most vexing problems for Marx" (24). While attempting to grasp capital's origins – by way of primitive accumulation or meeting of owners of labor power and capital – Marx ends up knee-deep "in the embarrassments of philosophies of history" since all these presupposed beginnings "can be false but never true" (Jameson 76). While Jameson argues that these are "necessary starting points in the void without presuppositions" (76), Marx's endeavor at historical narrative is constantly punctured by specific temporality 'secreted' by the capitalist mode of production in which "nothing happens for a first time … and there are no beginnings" (Jameson

62). Learning from the failures of reification theory – from Lukács to Baudrillard – to grasp reification's roots in the ongoing universalization of the capitalist mode of production, Jameson aims to maintain dialectical movement, from production time and exchange time to "existential time" of everyday life. This perpetual conversion of the historicity of capital into the eternal present of the market's ever and ever faster exchange – epitomized today by the fully computerized algorithmic "High Frequency Trade" (HFT), producing profit by compressing the time between transactions, reacting on even the most subtle market shift – is moved by the 'extinguishment' of past labor-time, raw materials, and commodities in the moment of creation of new value as if it where ex nihilo. This question of the temporality of the capitalist system and "extinguishing of its seemingly constitutive moments and elements in the past," is the question of its reproduction, through which capitalist production seems to become "an infernal machine, an autotelic system" (Jameson 106). In the following chapter, "Capital in Its Space," Jameson sets out to explain how this reproduction is contingent upon the incessant expansion of this machine by way of its constant "breaking down." For Jameson, this is another point of Marx's phenomenological principle; that

> *what allows an act to come to consciousness is not its success (for then its traces and achievements have simply become part of the world of being as such) as rather its failure, the gesture broken in mid-air, the tool shattered, the stumble and the body's exhaustion. (Jameson 113)*

Capital's spatial dimension is treated almost exclusively as a part of the analysis of production – especially the period after the emergence of machinery, "a climax of Marx's description of capital" and the transformative power it yields over pre-industrial societies – once more asserting that Marx identifies time with "quantity and space … with quality" (Jameson 111), again something that is dropped from further discussion by the end of the chapter. To end his essay-long but creative reading of Capital that can stand on its own with other classical texts in the field – even when many of its ideas, even central ones, are left underdeveloped – Jameson returns to a more obvious problem, the political nature of Capital. Once more overturning classical wisdom, he argues that "the absence of political dimension from Marxism – its radical disjunctions of 'economics' … from politics – is one of its great and original strengths" (Jameson 141). How is it possible that of all works, it is Capital that lacks a political conclusion or even a hint of strategy for left-wing politics?

The answer is in the radical novelty of Marx's Capital after which a "pure" political theory – which Jameson rather narrowly equates with a theory of state constitution – just as a "pure" economic theory, is not possible. The main political effect of Capital is in the representation of "a peculiar machine whose evolution is (dialectically) at one with its breakdown, its expansion at one with its malfunction, its growth with its collapse" (Jameson 142). Rather than showing the system's limits and therefore its vulnerability, what Marx demonstrated is that "the system cannot not expand; if it remains stable it stagnated and dies; it must continue to absorb everything in its path" (Jameson 146).

Representing Capital walks a fine line between an appraisal of the systemic nature of 'cognitive mapping' Marx delivers in Capital's narrative, and valuing the price Marx had to pay for this by laboriously working through the various failures he continued to face. It was precisely this repression and the unresolvable tension underlying Marx's fundamental work – that between structural analysis which breaks down the capitalist machine into its constituent parts and the historical approach which aims to "narratively" rebuild it – that led to the consolidation of not only different but sometimes starkly opposing Marxist schools of thought in the 20th century. Rather than digging itself into the trenches of economism or choosing the path of subjective voluntarism, Marxism in the 21st century should return to this dialectical promise of Marx's work, regardless of the peril of its possible failure.

Can capitalism be seen? What does it mean to see capitalism or, what should capitalism look like to be perceptible as a system? How does "seeing" capitalism relate to thinking it? Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle take up these questions in Cartographies of the Absolute (2015) by assessing the "perceptual" potential of various different cultural artefacts using Jameson's landmark proposition of 'cognitive mapping' advocated in his seminal work Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991). As both authors profess, it is one of Jameson's most under-theorized concepts, so much so that he uses it as little more than a specific name for a problem which is "at once political, economic, aesthetic and existential" (Toscano and Kinkle 22). Far from being undermined in Cartographies of the Absolute, the complexity of this problem is accentuated as is visible from the title itself: what kind of cartography can provide orientation in a capitalist space which is, as we saw, boundless? Since the very use of the concept "absolute" – as the authors themselves profess

a “theological rather than a philosophical category” (Toscano and Kinkle 23), thus reflecting Jameson’s quip that perhaps “theology could have done a better job of capitalism consisting as it is of a free play of categories in the void and an exercise of figuration without a referent” (Jameson 5) – indicates a fundamental unrepresentability, Toscano and Kinkle’s call for the philosophical and technical mapping of contemporary capitalism seems to be paradoxical. But it is precisely due to the inability to fully close the representational structure of the capitalist world-system that these attempts can only be aesthetic; as a starting point they necessarily take the particularity of the subject’s own conditions of existence and its relation to the world market. While attempting to dispel the inherent “everyday life actually-existing metaphysics of capitalism” (Toscano and Kinkle 23), cognitive mapping represents thus neither a simple ideological nor a scientific practice, while at the same time being impossible without both. So, how does Jameson’s claim that “the study of ‘capital itself’ is now our true ontology” (4) transform aesthetics and representation, especially in their relation to political action?

Toscano and Kinkle shuffle through contemporary aesthetic practices – everything from contemporary Hollywood and TV shows to the theoretical and artistic work of the likes of Paul Virilio, Alan Sekula, or Harun Farocki – which by transgressing the boundaries between theoretical and artistic or technical and representational, seem to be able to cross the line between detail and panorama in their depiction of the structure of the contemporary economy. Many of these analyzed aesthetic practices of representing capitalism, as the authors themselves underline, are unintentional; rather than being an active attempt at creating “the totality of class relations at global level” (Toscano and Kinkle 12), they are a symptom of capital’s move to the real subsumption in which the process of accumulation and circulation becomes indistinguishable from social relation itself. It is as if from time to time capital voluntarily breaks from the anonymity and opaqueness of market circulation only to be drawn into it again, secretly coveting to be considered in all the glory of its horrid effects. But it is only once we move from observing these effects in and of themselves – for Adam Smith we can deduce the underlying process only from observing its effects – and take Marx’s famous path to “the hidden abode” of production that we can face “the secret of profit making.” The question that must be answered is the one first posed in the work of Guy Debord: “how has the realm of human affairs called ‘the economy’ been fixed as an object of inquiry and of

technical or aesthetic representation?" (Toscano and Kinkle 31). To the author's theoretical resilience we can credit the enlargement of Jameson's original proposition of cognitive mapping – by turning from spatial to temporal orientation or introducing the mapping of 'commodity chains' – while at the same time holding onto the contradictory nature of the proposition itself. The current obsession of "top-down mapping" of the globe (the point in which technology converges with war-making and with art, as in the work of the grandfather of aerial photography Edward Steichen) is a sign of contemporary struggle over the field of visibility, battling around the horizontal or vertical nature of the proposed construction. In the first of three parts – "Capitalism and Panorama" – Toscano and Kinkle deal with "the aesthetics of economy," something which "comes with urgency" in times of crisis given our "cognitive and political deficit" (33). We are returned to some of the first representations of capitalism as a system, namely that of the classical political economy itself, tables and charts providing snapshots of commodity, money, and labor movement. Since the formalization and mathematization of the economy in the second part of the 20th century and the replacement of physics as its scientific model, economical science has started to move in the direction of microeconomics, in the process becoming willfully ignorant of any kind of critical reflection on the social whole. Of course, this excision of the whole is not exclusive to economy; Toscano and Kinkle attribute this radical change in the point of view of contemporary social sciences to an aesthetic war waged against the concept of totality, leading not to "a shipwreck with the spectator, but a shipwreck of the spectator" (Toscano and Kinkle 40). Characteristic of this fundamentally epistemological movement is Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (ANT) which, while borrowing its language and concepts heavily from cartography, aims to challenge the perceived predominance of the 'sociology of the social,' comparing his practical metaphysics to a grandiose model of society as a totality, a single basic structure of reality. Toscano and Kinkle follow a host of other authors who have recently become wary of the trend that declares any attempt at viewing totality as at best an ideological error and at worst a conspiratorial construct of a paranoid mind which should lead to institutionalization. While networks are an indispensable tool for grasping the rhizomatic structure of the global market, without the epistemological move from minute detail to panorama there can be no bursting of "the dominant order of the representation" (Toscano and Kinkle 61). In the second part – "Cities and Crises" – Toscano and Kinkle turn to a (predominantly) western grasp of the effects of the neoliberal revolution and the financialization of

urban life over the last couple of decades. Cinematic experience influenced by the New York social crisis of the 1970s is depicted in movies such as Wolfen (1981), Escape from New York (1981), and The Warriors (1979). In these movies cities seem eerily depopulated and derelict with the sole form of collective interaction taking the guise of perpetual war, either civil as in Warriors or as a kind of supra-natural class war in the case of Wolfen, with werewolves personifying not so much social forces – Marx's 'Träger' – as they represent a dialectical counter-embodiment of capitalism's "blind unrestrainable passion" and "werewolf hunger" (Toscano and Kinkle 131) for infinite expansion, a quasi-natural force awakened by capitalist deterritorialization. Toscano and Kinkle devote a whole chapter to David Simon's The Wire, which at the institutional and social level, in meticulous detail, dramatizes "the dialectical relation between the territorial and capitalist relations of power" (147) playing out in the contemporary American city. Choosing to overlook some of the more obvious issues – the limits that David Simon's refusal of the possibility of progressive collective action or his fundamentally liberal critique of American oligarchy and de-industrialized late capitalism etc. puts on the project of representing capitalism – Toscano and Kinkle accentuate not the show's often praised "gripping realism" resulting from the incentive to "follow the money," but its dramatization of the 'narrative of defeat' (Jameson 352) or the inability "of individuals caught in the situation – police, drug dealers, mayors … to adequately understand and master the forces at play" (Toscano and Kinkle 155). The last part of Cartographies deals with the 'art of logistics,' turning its focus from capitalist subjects and their cognitive (in)capacities to the 'it-narratives' of Terence Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein's 'global commodity chains,' the 'non-spaces' of production and circulation, and to the whole "hidden abode" of global circulation epitomized by a ship container, "a dumb, indifferent, interchangeable materialization of capital's abstract circulation" (Toscano and Kinkle 196). This dense reading and call for 'de-fetishization' of the logistical image, exemplified by the works of Alan Sekula and Harun Farocki, is followed by an analysis of the way in which the rising organic composition of capital in developed countries leads to the representation of 'abstract spaces' devoid of life, suffering the loss of referentiality to past labor. Therefore, the ultimate logistical fantasy of late-capitalism is an abstract, smooth space of flows devoid of all forms of contingent obstructions and limits, including humans themselves.

Just as Jameson's work focuses on the representation of capital, Toscano and Kinkle's work also necessarily leads to questions about political agency in our post-political times. Since for Jameson cognitive mapping is a working concept aimed at delivering theory from the dead-end street of class consciousness, the question which automatically poses itself is who is this collective agency, this "we" behind the activity of cognitive mapping? How can cognitive mapping be transformed from the practice of individual authorship into a constituent part of collective imagination? Toscano and Kinkle seem to be aware of this problem when they state that

> *there may indeed be something salutary in the harsh realization, after trying to establish one's place in a far-flung and mystifying totality … that 'we' may constitute the limit itself. If capital is indeed a relation, then it is not a relation that we can angelically call ourselves out of, and its contradictions run right through us. (237)*

Besides a theoretical McGuffin for the analysis of the limits of contemporary political imagination, cognitive mapping is at the same time, and perhaps more crucially, the name of the problem of the ever growing disjunction between knowing and acting. Toscano and Kinkle's analysis thus shifts the attention from the problem of class identity to the promise of knowledge's redemptive role. But the precondition of this kind of analysis is the radical divorce of knowledge from desire as a driving force which makes us want to see capitalism as a system, and ascribing the transgressive role to the truth in the form of the total – albeit unattainable – transparency of the system. Transparency which, perhaps only in retrospect of the failures of the political imagination of the global political left in the last decades, seems to present capitalism's ultimate defense and the firmest obstacle it can put in the path of social change.

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