Capitalism and the Real

‘Capitalist realism’ is not an original coinage. It was used as far back as the 1960s by a group of German Pop artists and by Michael Schudson in his 1984 book Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion, both of whom were making parodic references to socialist realism. What is new about my use of the term is the more expansive – even exorbitant – meaning that I ascribe to it. Capitalist realism as I understand it cannot be confined to art or to the quasi-propagandistic way in which advertising functions. It is more like a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning not only the production of culture but also the regulation of work and education, and acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action.

If capitalist realism is so seamless, and if current forms of resistance are so hopeless and impotent, where can an effective challenge come from? A moral critique of capitalism, emphasizing the ways in which it leads to suffering, only reinforces capitalist realism. Poverty, famine and war can be presented as an inevitable part of reality, while the hope that these forms of suffering could be eliminated easily painted as naive utopianism. Capitalist realism can only be threatened if it is shown to be in some way inconsistent or untenable; if, that is to say, capitalism’s ostensible ‘realism’ turns out to be nothing of the sort.

Needless to say, what counts as ‘realistic’, what seems possible at any point in the social field, is defined by a series of political determinations. An ideological position can never be really successful until it is naturalized, and it cannot be naturalized while it is still thought of as a value rather than a fact. Accordingly, neoliberalism has sought to eliminate the very
category of value in the ethical sense. Over the past thirty years, capitalist realism has successfully installed a ‘business ontology’ in which it is simply obvious that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business. As any number of radical theorists from Brecht through to Foucault and Badiou have maintained, emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a ‘natural order’, must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable. It is worth recalling that what is currently called realistic was itself once ‘impossible’: the slew of privatizations that took place since the 1980s would have been unthinkable only a decade earlier, and the current political-economic landscape (with unions in abeyance, utilities and railways denationalized) could scarcely have been imagined in 1975. Conversely, what was once eminently possible is now deemed unrealistic. ‘Modernization’, Badiou bitterly observes, ‘is the name for a strict and servile definition of the possible. These ‘reforms’ invariably aim at making impossible what used to be practicable (for the largest number), and making profitable (for the dominant oligarchy) what did not used to be so’.

At this point, it is perhaps worth introducing an elementary theoretical distinction from Lacanian psychoanalysis which Žižek has done so much to give contemporary currency: the difference between the Real and reality. As Alenka Zupancic explains, psychoanalysis’s positing of a reality principle invites us to be suspicious of any reality that presents itself as natural. ‘The reality principle’, Zupancic writes, is not some kind of natural way associated with how things are ... The reality principle itself is ideologically mediated; one could even claim that it constitutes the highest form of ideology, the ideology that presents itself as empirical fact (or biological, economic...) necessity (and that we tend to
For Lacan, the Real is what any ‘reality’ must suppress; indeed, reality constitutes itself through just this repression. The Real is an unrepresentable X, a traumatic void that can only be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality. So one strategy against capitalist realism could involve invoking the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents to us.

Environmental catastrophe is one such Real. At one level, to be sure, it might look as if Green issues are very far from being ‘unrepresentable voids’ for capitalist culture. Climate change and the threat of resource-depletion are not being repressed so much as incorporated into advertising and marketing. What this treatment of environmental catastrophe illustrates is the fantasy structure on which capitalist realism depends: a presupposition that resources are infinite, that the earth itself is merely a husk which capital can at a certain point slough off like a used skin, and that any problem can be solved by the market (In the end, Wall-E presents a version of this fantasy – the idea that the infinite expansion of capital is possible, that capital can proliferate without labor – on the off world ship, Axiom, all labor is performed by robots; that the burning up of Earth’s resources is only a temporary glitch, and that, after a suitable period of recovery, capital can terraform the planet and recolonize it). Yet environmental catastrophe features in late capitalist culture only as a kind of simulacra, its real implications for capitalism too traumatic to be assimilated into the system. The significance of Green critiques is that they suggest that, far from being the only viable political-economic system, capitalism is in fact primed to destroy the entire human environment. The relationship between capitalism and eco-disaster is neither coincidental nor accidental: capital’s ‘need of a constantly expanding market’, its ‘growth
fetish’, mean that capitalism is by its very nature opposed to any notion of sustainability.

But Green issues are already a contested zone, already a site where politicization is being fought for. In what follows, I want to stress two other aporias in capitalist realism, which are not yet politicized to anything like the same degree. The first is mental health. Mental health, in fact, is a paradigm case of how capitalist realism operates. Capitalist realism insists on treating mental health as if it were a natural fact, like weather (but, then again, weather is no longer a natural fact so much as a political-economic effect). In the 1960s and 1970s, radical theory and politics (Laing, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, etc.) coalesced around extreme mental conditions such as schizophrenia, arguing, for instance, that madness was not a natural, but a political, category. But what is needed now is a politicization of much more common disorders. Indeed, it is their very commonness which is the issue: in Britain, depression is now the condition that is most treated by the NHS. In his book The Selfish Capitalist, Oliver James has convincingly posited a correlation between rising rates of mental distress and the neoliberal mode of capitalism practiced in countries like Britain, the USA and Australia. In line with James’s claims, I want to argue that it is necessary to reframe the growing problem of stress (and distress) in capitalist societies. Instead of treating it as incumbent on individuals to resolve their own psychological distress, instead, that is, of accepting the vast privatization of stress that has taken place over the last thirty years, we need to ask: how has it become acceptable that so many people, and especially so many young people, are ill? The ‘mental health plague’ in capitalist societies would suggest that, instead of being the only social system that works, capitalism is inherently dysfunctional, and that the cost of it appearing to work is very high.

The other phenomenon I want to highlight is bureaucracy. In making their case against socialism, neoliberal ideologues often
excoriated the top-down bureaucracy which supposedly led to institutional sclerosis and inefficiency in command economies. With the triumph of neoliberalism, bureaucracy was supposed to have been made obsolete; a relic of an unlamented Stalinist past. Yet this is at odds with the experiences of most people working and living in late capitalism, for whom bureaucracy remains very much a part of everyday life. Instead of disappearing, bureaucracy has changed its form; and this new, decentralized, form has allowed it to proliferate. The persistence of bureaucracy in late capitalism does not in itself indicate that capitalism does not work – rather, what it suggests is that the way in which capitalism does actually work is very different from the picture presented by capitalist realism.

In part, I have chosen to focus on mental health problems and bureaucracy because they both feature heavily in an area of culture which has becoming increasingly dominated by the imperatives of capitalist realism: education. Through most of the current decade, I worked as a lecturer in a Further Education college, and in what follows, I will draw extensively on my experiences there. In Britain, Further Education colleges used to be places which students, often from working class backgrounds, were drawn to if they wanted an alternative to more formal state educational institutions. Ever since Further Education colleges were removed from local authority control in the early 1990s, they have become subject both to ‘market’ pressures and to government-imposed targets. They have been at the vanguard of changes that would be rolled out through the rest of the education system and public services – a kind of lab in which neoliberal ‘reforms’ of education have been trialed, and as such, they are the perfect place to begin an analysis of the effects of capitalist realism.
Nothing could be a clearer illustration of what Žižek has identified as the failure of the Father function, the crisis of the paternal superego in late capitalism, than a typical edition of *Supernanny*. The program offers what amounts to a relentless, although of course implicit, attack on postmodernity’s permissive hedonism. Supernanny is a Spinozist insofar as, like Spinoza, she takes it for granted that children are in a state of abjection. They are unable to recognize their own interests, unable to apprehend either the causes of their actions or their (usually deleterious) effects. But the problems that Supernanny confronts do not arise from the actions or character of the children – who can only be expected to be idiotic hedonists – but with the parents. It is the parents’ following of the trajectory of the pleasure principle, the path of least resistance, that causes most of the misery in the families. In a pattern that quickly becomes familiar, the parents’ pursuit of the easy life leads them to accede to their children’s every demand, which become increasingly tyrannical.

Rather like many teachers or other workers in what used to be called ‘public service’, Supernanny has to sort out problems of socialization that the family can no longer resolve. A Marxist Supernanny would of course turn away from the troubleshooting of individual families to look at the structural causes which produce the same repeated effect.

The problem is that late capitalism insists and relies upon the very equation of desire with interests that parenting used to be based on rejecting. In a culture in which the ‘paternal’ concept of duty has been subsumed into the ‘maternal’ imperative to enjoy,
it can seem that the parent is *failing* in their duty if they in any way impede their children’s absolute right to enjoyment. Partly this is an effect of the increasing requirement that both parents work; in these conditions, when the parent sees the child very little, the tendency will often be to refuse to occupy the ‘oppressive’ function of telling the child what to do. The parental disavowal of this role is doubled at the level of cultural production by the refusal of ‘gatekeepers’ to do anything but give audiences what they already (appear to) want. The concrete question is: if a return to the paternal superego – the stern father in the home, Reithian superciliousness in broadcasting – is neither possible nor desirable, then how are we to move beyond the culture of monotonous moribund conformity that results from a refusal to challenge or educate? A question as massive as this cannot of course be finally answered in a short book such as this, and what follows here will amount to a few starting points and suggestions. In brief, though, I believe that it is Spinoza who offers the best resources for thinking through what a ‘paternalism without the father’ might look like.

In *Tarrying with the Negative*, Žižek famously argues that a certain Spinozism is the ideology of late capitalism. Žižek believes that Spinoza’s rejection of deontology for an ethics based around the concept of health is allegedly flat with capitalism’s amoral affective engineering. The famous example here is Spinoza’s reading of the myth of the Fall and the foundation of Law. On Spinoza’s account, God does not condemn Adam for eating the apple because the action is wrong; he tells him that he should not consume the apple because it will poison him. For Žižek, this dramatizes the termination of the Father function. An act is wrong not because Daddy says so; Daddy only says it is ‘wrong’ because performing the act will be harmful to us. In Žižek’s view, Spinoza’s move both deprives the grounding of Law in a sadistic act of scission (the cruel cut of castration), at the same time as it denies the ungrounded positing of agency in an
act of pure volition, in which the subject assumes responsibility for everything. In fact, Spinoza has immense resources for analyzing the affective regime of late capitalism, the video-drome-control apparatus described by Burroughs, Philip K. Dick and David Cronenberg in which agency is dissolved in a phantasmagoric haze of psychic and physical intoxicants. Like Burroughs, Spinoza shows that, far from being an aberrant condition, addiction is the standard state for human beings, who are habitually enslaved into reactive and repetitive behaviors by frozen images (of themselves and the world). Freedom, Spinoza shows, is something that can be achieved only when we can apprehend the real causes of our actions, when we can set aside the ‘sad passions’ that intoxicate and entrance us.

There’s no doubt that late capitalism certainly articulates many of its injunctions via an appeal to (a certain version of) health. The banning of smoking in public places, the relentless monstering of working class diet on programs like You Are What You Eat, do appear to indicate that we are already in the presence of a paternalism without the Father. It is not that smoking is ‘wrong’, it is that it will lead to our failing to lead long and enjoyable lives. But there are limits to this emphasis on good health: mental health and intellectual development barely feature at all, for instance. What we see instead is a reductive, hedonic model of health which is all about ‘feeling and looking good’. To tell people how to lose weight, or how to decorate their house, is acceptable; but to call for any kind of cultural improvement is to be oppressive and elitist. The alleged elitism and oppression cannot consist in the notion that a third party might know someone’s interest better than they know it themselves, since, presumably smokers are deemed either to be unaware of their interests or incapable of acting in accordance with them. No: the problem is that only certain types of interest are deemed relevant, since they reflect values that are held to be consensual. Losing weight, decorating your house and
improving your appearance belong to the ‘consentimental’ regime.

In an excellent interview at the Register.com, the documentary film-maker Adam Curtis identifies the contours of this regime of affective management.

TV now tells you what to feel.

It doesn’t tell you what to think any more. From EastEnders to reality format shows, you’re on the emotional journey of people – and through the editing, it gently suggests to you what is the agreed form of feeling. “Hugs and Kisses”, I call it.

I nicked that off Mark Ravenhill who wrote a very good piece which said that if you analyse television now it’s a system of guidance – it tells you who is having the Bad Feelings and who is having the Good Feelings. And the person who is having the Bad Feelings is redeemed through a “hugs and kisses” moment at the end. It really is a system not of moral guidance, but of emotional guidance.

Morality has been replaced by feeling. In the ‘empire of the self’ everyone ‘feels the same’ without ever escaping a condition of solipsism. ‘What people suffer from,’ Curtis claims,

is being trapped within themselves – in a world of individualism everyone is trapped within their own feelings, trapped within their own imaginations. Our job as public service broadcasters is to take people beyond the limits of their own self, and until we do that we will carry on declining.

The BBC should realize that. I have an idealistic view, but if the BBC could do that, taking people beyond their own selves, it will renew itself in a way that jumps over the competition. The competition is obsessed by serving people in their little selves. And in a way, actually, Murdoch for all his power,
is trapped by the self. That’s his job, to feed the self.

In the BBC, it’s the next step forward. It doesn’t mean we go back to the 1950s and tell people how to dress, what we do is say “we can free you from yourself” – and people would love it.

Curtis attacks the internet because, in his view, it facilitates communities of solipsists, interpassive networks of like-minds who confirm, rather than challenge, each others’ assumptions and prejudices. Instead of having to confront other points of view in a contested public space, these communities retreat into closed circuits. But, Curtis claims, the impact of internet lobbies on Old Media is disastrous, since, not only does its reactive pro-activity allow the media class to further abnegate its function to educate and lead, it also allows populist currents on both the left and the right to ‘bully’ media producers into turning out programming that is anodyne and mediocre.

Curtis’s critique has a point, but it misses important dimensions of what is happening on the net. Contrary to Curtis’s account of blogging, blogs can generate new discourse networks that have no correlate in the social field outside cyberspace. As Old Media increasingly becomes subsumed into PR and the consumer report replaces the critical essay, some zones of cyberspace offer resistance to a ‘critical compression’ that is elsewhere depressingly pervasive. Nevertheless, the interpassive simulation of participation in postmodern media, the network narcissism of MySpace and Facebook, has, in the main, generated content that is repetitive, parasitic and conformist. In a seeming irony, the media class’s refusal to be paternalistic has not produced a bottom-up culture of breathtaking diversity, but one that is increasingly infantilized. By contrast, it is paternalistic cultures that treat audiences as adults, assuming that they can cope with cultural products that are complex and intellectually demanding. The reason that focus groups and capitalist
feedback systems fail, even when they generate commodities that are immensely popular, is that people do not know what they want. This is not only because people’s desire is already present but concealed from them (although this is often the case). Rather, the most powerful forms of desire are precisely cravings for the strange, the unexpected, the weird. These can only be supplied by artists and media professionals who are prepared to give people something different from that which already satisfies them; by those, that is to say, prepared to take a certain kind of risk. 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. It is another irony that capitalism’s ‘society of risk’ is much less likely to take this kind of risk than was the supposedly stodgy, centralized culture of the postwar social consensus. It was the public service-oriented BBC and Channel 4 that perplexed and delighted me with the likes of Tinker, Tailor, Soldier Spy, Pinter plays and Tarkovsky seasons; it was this BBC that also funded the popular avant gardism of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, which embedded sonic experimentalism into everyday life. Such innovations are unthinkable now that the public has been displaced by the consumer. The effect of permanent structural instability, the ‘cancellation of the long term’, is invariably stagnation and conservatism, not innovation. This is not a paradox. As Adam Curtis’s remarks above make clear, the affects that predominate in late capitalism are fear and cynicism. These emotions do not inspire bold thinking or entrepreneurial leaps, they breed conformity and the cult of the minimal variation, the turning out of products which very closely resemble those that are already successful. Meanwhile, films such as the aforementioned Tarkovsky’s Solaris and Stalker – plundered by Hollywood since as far back as Alien and Blade Runner – were produced in the ostensibly moribund conditions of
the Brezhnevite Soviet state, meaning that the USSR acted as a cultural entrepreneur for Hollywood. Since it is now clear that a certain amount of stability is necessary for cultural vibrancy, the question to be asked is: how can this stability be provided, and by what agencies?

It’s well past time for the left to cease limiting its ambitions to the establishing of a big state. But being ‘at a distance from the state’ does not mean either abandoning the state or retreating into the private space of affects and diversity which Žižek rightly argues is the perfect complement to neoliberalism’s domination of the state. It means recognizing that the goal of a genuinely new left should be not be to take over the state but to subordinate the state to the general will. This involves, naturally, resuscitating the very concept of a general will, reviving – and modernizing – the idea of a public space that is not reducible to an aggregation of individuals and their interests. The ‘methodological individualism’ of the capitalist realist worldview presupposes the philosophy of Max Stirner as much as that of Adam Smith or Hayek in that it regards notions such as the public as ‘spooks’, phantom abstractions devoid of content. All that is real is the individual (and their families). The symptoms of the failures of this worldview are everywhere – in a disintegrated social sphere in which teenagers shooting each other has become commonplace, in which hospitals incubate aggressive superbugs – what is required is that effect be connected to structural cause. Against the postmodernist suspicion of grand narratives, we need to reassert that, far from being isolated, contingent problems, these are all the effects of a single systemic cause: Capital. We need to begin, as if for the first time, to develop strategies against a Capital which presents itself as ontologically, as well as geographically, ubiquitous.

Despite initial appearances (and hopes), capitalist realism was not undermined by the credit crisis of 2008. The speculations that capitalism might be on the verge of collapsing soon
proved to be unfounded. It quickly became clear that, far from constituting the end of capitalism, the bank bail-outs were a massive re-assertion of the capitalist realist insistence that there is no alternative. Allowing the banking system to disintegrate was held to be *unthinkable*, and what ensued was a vast hemorrhaging of public money into private hands. Nevertheless, what did happen in 2008 was the collapse of the framework which has provided ideological cover for capitalist accumulation since the 1970s. After the bank bail-outs neoliberalism has, in every sense, been discredited. That is not to say that neoliberalism has disappeared overnight; on the contrary, its assumptions continue to dominate political economy, but they do so now no longer as part of an ideological project that has a confident forward momentum, but as inertial, undead defaults. We can now see that, while neoliberalism was necessarily capitalist realist, capitalist realism need not be neoliberal. In order to save itself, capitalism could revert to a model of social democracy or to a *Children of Men*-like authoritarianism. Without a credible and coherent alternative to capitalism, capitalist realism will continue to rule the political-economic unconscious.

But even if it is now evident that the credit crisis will not lead to the end of capitalism all by itself, the crisis has led to the relaxing of a certain kind of mental paralysis. We are now in a political landscape littered with what Alex Williams called ‘ideological rubble’ – it is year zero again, and a space has been cleared for a new anti-capitalism to emerge which is not necessarily tied to the old language or traditions. One of the left’s vices is its endless rehearsal of historical debates, its tendency to keep going over Kronstadt or the New Economic Policy rather than planning and organizing for a future that it really believes in. The failure of previous forms of anti-capitalist political organization should not be a cause for despair, but what needs to be left behind is a certain romantic attachment to the politics of failure, to the comfortable position of a defeated marginality. The credit
crisis is an opportunity – but it needs to be treated as a tremendous speculative challenge, a spur for a renewal that is not a return. As Badiou has forcefully insisted, an effective anti-capitalism must be a rival to Capital, not a reaction to it; there can be no return to pre-capitalist territorialities. Anti-capitalism must oppose Capital’s globalism with its own, authentic, universality.

It is crucial that a genuinely revitalized left confidently occupy the new political terrain I have (very provisionally) sketched here. Nothing is inherently political; politicization requires a political agent which can transform the taken-for-granted into the up-for-grabs. If neoliberalism triumphed by incorporating the desires of the post 68 working class, a new left could begin by building on the desires which neoliberalism has generated but which it has been unable to satisfy. For example, the left should argue that it can deliver what neoliberalism signally failed to do: a massive reduction of bureaucracy. What is needed is a new struggle over work and who controls it; an assertion of worker autonomy (as opposed to control by management) together with a rejection of certain kinds of labor (such as the excessive auditing which has become so central feature of work in post-Fordism). This is a struggle that can be won – but only if a new political subject coalesces; it is an open question as to whether the old structures (such as the trade unions) will be capable of nurturing that subjectivity, or whether it will entail the formation of wholly new political organizations. New forms of industrial action need to be instituted against managerialism. For instance, in the case of teachers and lecturers, the tactic of strikes (or even of marking bans) should be abandoned, because they only hurt students and members (at the college where I used to work, one-day strikes were pretty much welcomed by management because they saved on the wage bill whilst causing negligible disruption to the college). What is needed is the strategic withdrawal of forms of labor which will
only be noticed by management: all of the machineries of self-
surveillance that have no effect whatsoever on the delivery of
education, but which managerialism could not exist without.
Instead of the gestural, spectacular politics around (noble) causes
like Palestine, it’s time that teaching unions got far more
immanent, and take the opportunity opened up by the crisis to
begin to rid public services of business ontology. When even
businesses can’t be run as businesses, why should public
services?

We must convert widespread mental health problems from
medicalized conditions into effective antagonisms. Affective
disorders are forms of captured discontent; this disaffection can
and must be channeled outwards, directed towards its real cause,
Capital. Furthermore, the proliferation of certain kinds of mental
illness in late capitalism makes the case for a new austerity, a case
that is also made by the increasing urgency of dealing with
environmental disaster. Nothing contradicts capitalism’s consti-
tutive imperative towards growth more than the concept of
rationing goods and resources. Yet it is becoming uncomfortably
clear that consumer self-regulation and the market will not by
themselves avert environmental catastrophe. There is a libidinal,
as well as a practical case, to be made for this new ascesis. If, as
Oliver James, Žižek and Supernanny have shown, unlimited
license leads to misery and disaffection, then limitations placed
on desire are likely to quicken, rather than deaden, it. In any case,
rationing of some sort is inevitable. The issue is whether it will be
collectively managed, or whether it will be imposed by authori-
tarian means when it is already too late. Quite what forms this
collective management should take is, again, an open question,
one that can only be resolved practically and experimentally.

The long, dark night of the end of history has to be grasped as
an enormous opportunity. The very oppressive pervasiveness of
capitalist realism means that even glimmers of alternative
political and economic possibilities can have a disproportionately
great effect. The tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain of reaction which has marked the horizons of possibility under capitalist realism. From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again.