

# Capitalism Doesn't Exist

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## 1. There is no single hegemonic capitalist system

Apparently, Karl Marx never spoke of capitalism (Graeber 2018; Kallis 2017) - an important fact given his contribution to theorising the topic, yet today we cannot stop talking about it. We often talk about capitalism as a hegemonic socio-economic system. You may have heard someone say something like 'it is easier for young people to imagine the end of the world, than the end of capitalism'. In universities and activist communities critique and lament of 'the (capitalist) system' is ubiquitous. In these settings, many people talk about capitalism as the source of all the world's discontent, inequality and oppression.

But what is capitalism exactly? A set of institutions, such as private property, private enterprise? Capital accumulation? A system characterised or dominated by the money - commodity - money cycle? Or dominated by wage labour? Or perhaps all of the above?

We can think about capitalism as a network of relations in which capitalist modes of production – i.e. wage labour, capital accumulation, market mediation of transactions, private enterprise - dominate. This perspective accurately depicts many aspects of how we go about our lives, from eating to entertainment, from physical gratification to spiritual and mental wellbeing. Very often we sell our labour for money and then use that money to purchase goods and services (of which there appears to be an ever expansion), and even to invest to accumulate more capital – almost all of us have at the very least a bank account or superannuation account that accumulates interest.

However, this view ignores the vast ocean of labour directed to maintaining our existence and making our lives enjoyable and worthwhile - such as care work, volunteer work, subsistence labour, public sector labour, or illegal or underground economic activities (Gibson Graham 2006). These other modes of production are implicated in capitalist modes of production and vice-versa. For instance, private corporations that largely engage in capitalist production would never have existed if their employees were not supported by 'free' care or housework (Waring 1988). Though today more of this work is being done by wage labour. Likewise, the tools used in care or housework are often produced using capitalist modes of production. The webs of production and labour are impossible to disentangle - they at once support and are supported by each other. What is clear, however, is that capitalism falls extremely short in accounting for the whole picture of how we live our lives. In fact, if we combine non-capitalist forms of production, they may actually account for more work than wage labour (i.e. capitalist). In the 2016 Australian Census, over 13 million people reported doing unpaid domestic labour each week; 3.6 million people engaged in voluntary work at some point in the year; 2.1 million carers provided unpaid

care for people with disabilities, long term illness or old age; and 5.2 million people provided care for children. Added to this we ought to add all the labour within the public sector and from not-for-profits as they are not strictly capitalist. Taken together this clearly accounts for a very significant volume of the work underpinning, or constituting, our lives.

The diversity of economic activities mentioned above support the idea that there is no independent or objective capitalism in our world that can account for our behaviour, no overarching system in which we are all living. Rather, we engage in a collection of capitalist behaviours and processes, such as through our superannuation investment, or when we buy food from private supermarkets. In this sense, we can do away with capitalist practices in as much as we have the capacity and willingness to do so. While ‘the system’ certainly has significant influence over our lives – making it difficult to act in non-capitalist ways, we ultimately control the processes that we see as constituting ‘the system’.

## **2. Capitalism also raises some semantic concerns.**

In 1946, George Orwell commented that ‘the word *Fascism* has now no meaning except in so far as it signifies ‘something not desirable’. The same could be said today of capitalism (and still fascism too...), though for many it can signify something desirable, either way it is shrouded in vagueness. Capitalism may invoke wealth, opportunity, and comfort to one person, yet to another, it may represent destruction, inequality, and greed. With this in mind, it may not even help the anti-capitalist cause to persist in calling for the downfall of capitalism. In consistently framing the discussion within a reification of capitalism, pro-capitalists might be reminded of all the positive connotations capitalism holds for them. Like how they can get food delivered to their door at any time of the day or wear headphones without cords. Anti-capitalists could be better off, as George Lakoff might say, to not think or talk of capitalism. When the battle is whether capitalism is ‘good’ or ‘bad’, and perhaps whether it is inevitable or not, detractors appear to be losing.

Moreover, through reinforcing an all-encompassing hegemony of capitalism, we mask the aforementioned diversity of economic actions, relationships and processes that sustain our lives. To put it another way, if we see everything as capitalist it is hard to imagine anything else. While many of us have heard staunch capitalists and neoliberal advocates claim that ‘there is no alternative’, ironically, the very idea of capitalism is often (re)produced and reified by those seeking to undermine it.

## **3. What is the actual concern?**

Is the concern capitalism per se? Or greed, exploitation and inequality? Certainly, capitalist modes of production allow these phenomena to flourish, but it is not only capitalist modes of

production that allow such flourishing. Greed, exploitation and inequality prevailed in feudal modes of production, mercantilist modes of production, and socialist modes of production. The negative side effects attributed to capitalism are not solely a symptom of capitalism. So rather than reinforcing a discursive tool that in many ways works to undermine social and economic justice, we may be better placed to turn our attention to the benefits and joys of non-capitalist production – such as sharing, caring, and conviviality. If we look back over our lives it is these practices that make our world beautiful and worthwhile (this isn't to say that some capitalist modes of production have not made significant positive contributions to our lives). Working to support and proliferate such practices is inspiring, and at least for me, a much more powerful call to action than 'smash the system' or 'smash capitalism'. The sociologist and philosopher, Bruno Latour has called on critics to add to rather than subtract when critiquing. He suggests that critics ought not to 'debunk' but to 'assemble', the critic should not 'lift the rug from under the feet of naive believers, but offer participants an arena to gather - to move closer to the 'Thing', the 'matter of concern' that is subject to critique (Latour 2004). Such a move aims to reveal how the matter of concern – in this instance, capitalism – is assembled and perhaps how we might travel in different directions or fashion new assemblages. This sketch of economic diversity is an attempt to do precisely that.