



Prologue

Capitalism and the spirit of engaged pluralism

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This edited collection participates in the conversation about capitalism. It is the result of an open call inviting submissions from scholars involved in social science debates about capitalism and capitalist practices. The call emphasised that while capitalism remains the dominant socioeconomic model, there is a growing and increasingly vocal demand to rethink and retheorise it. We invited potential authors to explore capitalism theoretically, conceptually, or empirically, emphasising our equal interest in works that seek to address ways to reform capitalism and those interested in envisioning what might come after it. As a result, the book now features a diverse array of contributions. It offers a platform for a multitude of authors to engage with capitalism in a variety of ways.

Assembled in the spirit of engaged pluralism, this book refrains from proposing a single framework for the study of capitalism. Engaged pluralism is an intellectual stance where different viewpoints are actively engaged with to avoid dogmatism and promote deeper understanding and dialogue (Bernstein, 1989). On the pages of this book, this effort takes the following forms: The book not only engages a plurality of voices, but the chapters also explore diverse theoretical and conceptual approaches. Different methodologies, as well as a range of materials, are used to retheorise capitalism. While some chapters are text-based, others turn to visual media or examine capitalism through the practice of pottery making. The book also engages with a variety of audiences whose contributions are relevant to the act of retheorising: among the authors are not only established academics but also university students.

Retheorising, understood within the ethos of engaged pluralism, is a diverse and messy scientific endeavour. It involves embracing variation and difference, while also acknowledging that a pluralistic project is inherently incomplete (Johns & Hall, 2024, p. 2). Instead of providing solace in a coherent theoretical framework, retheorising demands patience to endure the ongoing and evolving nature of inquiry. This is not a new suggestion: The idea of avoiding dogmatism by respecting ideational, theoretical, and methodological diversity has been central to scientific inquiry for centuries (Kurki, 2024). However, in the study of the economy and economic phenomena, the discipline of economics—in its neoclassical form in particular—occupied a hegemonic position for decades (e.g., Amin & Thrift, 2004). This book is part of the continuing effort to challenge this hegemony and expand inquiries in a more pluralist direction.

As a theoretical position, engaged pluralism recognises the multifaceted workings of capitalism. Capitalist social relations manifest in diverse ways within our rapidly changing world. Given the inherent complexity of the social world, engagement with various perspectives and interpretations can be argued to make inquiries more rigorous. This is achieved through the give and take of engagement, which may create momentary tensions but eventually enhances the validity of our conclusions (Box-Steffensmeier, 2022). Such tension is evident throughout the book: some chapters draw on the work of scholars who hold differing views on the nature of capitalism, creating theoretical contrasts with the perspectives presented in other chapters.

However, while the book's pluralist approach to retheorising capitalism may create internal divergence, this can also be understood as an epistemological effort to engage with the widest possible range of plausible alternatives. As pragmatist William James (1909) emphasises in his argument against monism, "something always escapes ... the word 'and' trails along after every sentence. ... Nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything". This resonates with queer scholar Eve Sedgwick's (1994, pp. 5–6) invitation to appreciate the richness of those "junctures" where not everything points in the same direction or signifies monolithically because "such junctures" are the "open mesh of possibilities". On the pages of this book, this pluralist proposition means accepting that various conceptualisations of capitalism—or capitalist and postcapitalist practices—can be simultaneously valid. Some chapters scrutinise the functioning of capitalism as a system, while others focus on how capitalist practices extend into more-than-economic or more-than-human fields like education or excrement. In some chapters the capitalocentrism of inquiries is troubled by illuminating more-than-capitalist or postcapitalist practices already taking place.

Engaged pluralism can also be understood as engagement with ontological diversity, as reflected in the rejection of the singular reality doctrine (Klein Schaarsberg, 2024) or the "one-world world" ontology (Law, 2015). This sort of engaged pluralism takes us beyond the claim that there are various valid perspectives or theoretical and conceptual approaches to capitalism, each representing a different attempt to understand the world. Beyond diversifying ways to know the world, ontological pluralism problematises one of the key assumptions of European or Western cosmologies—the assumption of a singular reality. This assumption, imposed by

colonial modernity, has led to the discrediting of other possible ontologies, reducing them to mere beliefs, myths, or legends (Kurki, 2024, p. 6). Examining capitalism in relation to, for example, Indigenous knowledge and Islamic spiritual and ethical development, the chapters in this edited collection can be understood to also foster ontologically and cosmologically pluralistic understandings of capitalism

Experimentation, creativity, and inventiveness are encouraged by engaged pluralism, which invites expanding the methodological routes through which capitalism is approached. While social sciences are generally assumed to be methodologically pluralist, in practice, this pluralism is quite limited. Given the restricted scope of methodological pluralism, inquiries may miss some of the most meaningful aspects of the social world, such as the sensory, tactile, and embodied (Kurki, 2024, p. 2). Recognising this, some chapters in this book call for a renewed methodological imagination, creativity, and inventiveness. They invite us, for example, to think about new ways of sensing the economy or to approach capitalism through the tactile effort of cutting, pasting, and gluing, i.e., collaging.

Engaged pluralism is distinct from alienated pluralism (Young, 2021) or fragmented pluralism that creates a world of separate monisms, or separate monologues (Bernstein, 1989, p. 16). In contrast, this book is a call to an engaged conversation about capitalism and the need to retheorise it. In its Greek origin, the word ‘theory’ [*theōria*] refers to contemplation, speculation, looking at, viewing, to a sight,, show, spectacle, and things looked at, but also spectator—the English word for theatre being of the same etymology. The Latin prefix re-, on the other hand, connotes words and phrases such as back, back from, back to the original place, again, anew, once more.

Retheorising, then, is all of this and more: to look back, to look again, to think anew, to speculate once more, to sense differently, to engage with the spectacle of capitalism with its various actors. As this book shows, this engagement may happen through various kinds of activities. To reflect this, the book has been structured into four sections entitled “Representing”, “Reimagining”, “Repairing”, and “Reconceptualising”. Each part of the book begins with an introduction that provides an overview of the chapters in that part. To underscore the dialogical character of the spirit in which the book has been put together, the book concludes with a ‘dialogue of snippets’ where the contributors to elucidate their understanding of capitalism and the imperative to engage in theorising it.

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