



Theorizing Capitalism's Cracks

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Accepted: 19 December 2022 / Published online: 24 January 2023

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Abstract

It is commonly said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Alternatives, framed as a simplistic dualism of capitalism vs communism, make it difficult to envision any alternative. Instead, the “sprouts” of communism lie concealed in capitalism, inherent in its contradictory logic and the twofold nature of labor. We present this theoretical framing so that our archaeological work can focus on people’s ‘other doing’ and suggest that it will always be difficult to envision alternatives to our capitalist present until we reclaim the inspiration that exists internal to capitalism itself.

Keywords Capitalism · Cracks · Labor · Historical archaeology

Introduction

Revolts against the logic of capital exist everywhere. Often the problem is to recognize them, but the more we focus our mind on cracks, the more our image of the map changes. The map of the world is not only a map of domination, it is also a map of revolts, of cracks opening, reaching, running, joining, closing, multiplying. The more we focus on cracks, the more a different image of the world opens up, a sort of anti-geography that not only reverses the signs of spatiality but challenges dimensionality itself. (Holloway 2010a:911)

It is commonly said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Since alternatives are typically framed as a simplistic dualism

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of capitalism vs communism, it should come as no surprise that any alternative to capitalism has been vilified since the very birth of the system. This ideological posturing of alternatives as totalizing structures adopts the vantage point of capital and absorbs and misdirects any and all theoretical discussion of challenges. We reject these ideas: the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union do not mean that “There are no Alternatives,” summarized as the TINA doctrine, or that Marx was wrong, or that revolutionary labor politics are not possible in the face of the collapse of unionized, organized labor. Many alternatives and revolutionary causes have been forgotten, erased, or actively concealed, resulting in a conformist history that reinforces the sense that there is no alternative. As Eagleton (2003:7) notes “it suited those in power that we should be able to imagine no alternatives to the present,” resulting in an alienation that makes it difficult to relate to our own history and our ability to make things different.

Historical archaeologists have done important work revealing capitalism’s destruction, exploitation, and trauma (González-Ruibal 2008, 2019; Hamilakis 2015; Hamilakis and Duke 2007; Hutchings and La Salle 2015; Matthews 2012; McGuire 2008; Saitta 2007; Wurst 2019; Wurst and Mrozowski 2016). Other recent archaeological studies of modern capitalism focus on dark heritage and “painful sites” as interventions which negotiate loss (Piccini and Holtorf 2011:21–22) or remind us of the failures and the “dark side” of capitalism (Lucas and Hreiðarsdóttir 2012:620). González-Ruibal (2008:247–248, 262) argues that a crucial form of our archaeological intervention is to show the daily and enormous destruction of matter and life. Archaeology can trigger action as “a way of dealing with a traumatic past” to strengthen critique and therapy (González-Ruibal 2008:262; see also González-Ruibal 2019:189–190).

Much of this literature on the historical archaeology of capitalism focuses on critique and emphasizes revelation–battling commonsense and dominant ideologies to show capitalism in its “true” horrifying form; laying bare how capitalism works and the resulting exploitation in particular contexts. This focus on revelation is important—we have done this ourselves—but we have come to realize that revelation alone is not enough and we are not satisfied with limiting our interventions to this option alone. As Bonefeld and Tischler (2018:8) state:

moaning about the “excesses” of capital has to stop. A lamenting critique merely seeks to create a fairer capitalism, conferring on capital the capacity to adopt a benevolent developmental logic. Capital is with necessity “excessive” in its exploitation of labor. To lament this is to misunderstand its social constitution.

Ollman (2008:12) argues that a critical analysis of capitalism without any notion of socialism “describes how capitalism works, shows who gets ‘screwed’ and by how much, offers a moral condemnation of same, prescribes... reformist solutions, and—because these no longer work—lapses into emotional despair and cynicism.” This “future shyness,” as Ollman (2008:11–12) calls it, is easily found in the cynicism and despair reflected in the archaeological literature that positions

our agency as revealing the exploitative capitalist structures or making the best of them as we cope with the trauma.

The unforeseen consequence of this praxis is that capitalism, with all its social relations of exploitation, emerges as a totalizing, oppressive structure that falls prey to the same dualisms and reinforces the idea of TINA by delaying any sense of alternative to a hoped for, mythic, and unspecified anticapitalist future. Critiquing the destruction while leaving out any coherent sense of alternatives risks perpetuating the ideology that obstructs any vision of alternative futures and reinforces capitalism as an inevitable age of destruction. Thus our well-intentioned critique actually bolsters ideas that there are no alternatives by adopting the polarizing logic of capital and framing all praxis within its structures. Holloway (2018:205) argues that we need to understand revolution as a movement that does not follow the agenda of capital: “there is a tendency in left thought to focus on what capital (through its mouthpieces) is saying and doing, and to criticize that. That is no doubt important, and yet it is wrong, it is completely upside down. Capital cannot be the starting-point of revolutionary thought.”

The Starting Point of Revolutionary Thought: There Have Always Been Alternatives

In this volume we follow Holloway to reject the common archaeological standpoint based solely on revelation and propose a different perspective, one that recognizes that viable alternatives have been around as long as capital has, internal to the very fabric of everyday life, and inherent in the contradictory logic of capitalism. Like Marx, we would argue that “the sprouts of communism” already lie concealed in capitalism (Ollman 2008:12) and our goal as archaeologists should be to focus our revelatory efforts toward unveiling them. Ollman (2014) has argued that common interpretations of Marx’s utopian ideas of communism are based on treating past, present and future as separate and independent stages of history, implying an inevitable evolutionary movement through these stages, an idea that is very familiar to archaeologists. This common perspective is based on viewing communism as a totalizing system from the perspective of communism itself, that is, as a not-yet-existing ideal. Basically, this frames our options as a choice between two sides of an exclusive dichotomy, either the devil we know or the devil we don’t know. Many forget that a significant portion of the *Communist Manifesto* was spent denouncing similar attempts (Marx and Engels 1987, especially chapter 3). This dualistic framing makes it very easy to see why many people find it difficult to believe in such a society (Ollman 2014:64–65).

Instead, Ollman argues that Marx viewed communism from the vantage point of capitalism itself, and these “sprouts” of communism already lie concealed within capitalism. These “sprouts” are found throughout capitalism and are even more numerous than in Marx’s time. Examples these “sprouts” that Ollman (2014:66) cite include developments that already exhibit some socialist characteristics, such as cooperatives, unions, and public education, as well as many conditions distinctive to late capitalism, such as the progressive replacement of private capital with the

banking system and the extensive planning that goes on in the organization of every corporation. Other “sprouts” are evident in major capitalist problems: unemployment “becomes a sprout of communism when viewed in terms of all the workers who would be available to share the work with those who are currently employed, expanding the amount of ‘free time’ for everyone” as well as “the profit driven destruction of the environment” which becomes a “sprout” when it is shown to have only communist solutions (Ollman 2014:68–76). Ollman’s (2014:76) conclusion is that “almost everywhere we look, the new communist world that capitalism has made possible is staring us right in the face.”

All of these “sprouts” exist because capitalism is a system fraught with contradictions, internal to capitalist social relations. Thus, Marx and Engels’ (1987: 1) eponymous quotes “what the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers” and “the bourgeois democrats, from the very first, will carry within it the seeds of its own destruction” (Marx and Engels 1850:5) are not predictions of an inevitable future state, but rather the realization that alternatives are already present, not as some utopia separate from capitalism, but lying in its very core.

These insights stem directly from Marx’s use of the dialectic as part of his philosophy of internal relations. In dialectical thought, society is comprised of internal relations and it is the surface appearance of these relations which are taken to be its parts. Thus, common social concepts or abstractions such as the economy, family, race, etc., do not and cannot exist apart from the underlying relations that create the surface appearance of ontological entities. One of the central facets of the dialectic is the unity of opposites, where dialectical relations unite opposites—capitalist/labor, master/slave, production/consumption, agriculture/industry, etc. into single internally constituted wholes. These opposing entities or contexts have different intrinsic interests and material conditions; thus, dialectical social relations always contain conflict and contradiction within them. From this, it follows that people make their own history, but not just as they please because the social relations both constrain and enable action. Human action is limited by the social relations, but these limitations also always present possibilities, cracks and fissures that have always allowed people to “do different.” These cracks and fissures are an internal aspect of capitalism and have always been part of the contradictions that lay at the root of capitalism.

Cracks, Sprouts, and the Dual Nature of Labor

The most important facet of understanding capitalism’s cracks lies in recognizing the dual nature of labor: in capitalism, human sensual activity exists as both useful or concrete labor and as estranged, alienated, or abstract labor. Marx (1967:49) himself claimed that this two-fold nature of labor is “the pivot on which a clear comprehension of Political Economy turns,” and in an 1867 letter to Engels, Marx cited the two-fold character of labor as one of the best points in *Capital* (cited in Holloway 2012:515).

This dual nature of labor is the central theme of Marx’s work and is key to understanding his approach to capitalism, humanity, and social theory (Hunt 1982). In his earlier work, Marx referred to “conscious life activity” as opposed

to estranged or alienated labor (especially Marx 1844), but in *Capital*, he uses the terms useful or concrete versus abstract labor. Holloway (2010a:915) suggests that the entirety of *Capital* can be seen as a critique of abstract labor from the perspective of useful labor.

Despite common arguments of a theoretical shift between the young and mature Marx, it is clear that these different terms refer to the same contradictory dialectical social relations and point to the division between concrete labor/abstract labor and the parallel distinction in commodities as having both use value and exchange value (Balibar 2011:II). This is the first point that Marx (1967: 53) makes in *Capital*, best summed up in this quote:

On the one hand all labor is, speaking physiologically, an expenditure of human labor power, and in its character of identical abstract human labor, it creates and forms the value of commodities. On the other hand, all labor is the expenditure of human labor power in a special form and with a definite aim, and in this, its character of concrete useful labor, it produces use values.

Useful or concrete labor is the self-determined, purposive conscious life activity that distinguishes humans from other animals and lies at the very heart of our humanity or species-being using Marx's term. It is the free conscious activity that "distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees" (Marx 1967:174). This work has both a social and a material basis; the worker relates to the natural world through their activity and through this activity to other human beings (Sayers 2003:108). Abstract labor, on the other hand, is the human activity that produces abstract surplus value in capitalism. In its most basic terms, capitalism is a system whereby the control of most of the production lies in very few hands. Those who do not own or control the means of production are forced to sell their labor power to those who do. Workers receive a wage in exchange for their labor, which produces goods that are the property of those who own the means of production. The value of these goods covers the wages paid to the worker, the raw materials used in production, and the wear and tear on the means of production. The excess above these costs, referred to as surplus value, is the basis of profit (Harman 2009:29). Therefore, in capitalism, people's free conscious life activity is subverted to alienated labor, "a labor we do not control, an activity that separates us from our fellow humans and from our species being" (Holloway 2010a:912, see also Bonefeld 2010).

The strength of Marx's concept of the two-fold nature of labor is realizing that concrete and abstract labor do not exist as separate acts, moments, or events, but are simultaneous and contradictory relations. It is not simply that we perform abstract labor at work and concrete labor at home. Because of this, we need different words to characterize both kinds of labor and the dramatically different social relations they represent. In a footnote to *Capital* (Marx 1967:54, emphasis in original), Engels notes:

The English language has the advantage of possessing different words for the two aspects of labor here considered. The labor which creates Use-Value . . . is *Work*, as distinguished from *Labour*; that which creates Value.

McGuire (1992:103) uses Engel's terms to distinguish work from labor, while Holloway (2010b:272) prefers to make the distinction more strongly by referring to *doing* instead of work for concrete labor, since the term work "still carries some of the disagreeable resonance of labor," while retaining the term labor for abstract production for exchange value. Whatever terms we use, the key is to cast the dual nature of labor as an internal dialectic since "concrete labor (potentially conscious life-activity) exists in the form of abstract labor, but exists in-against-and-beyond abstract labor" (Holloway 2012:517–518). As Holloway (2010b:98) notes, "the central issue is not the terms we use, but the distinction between the two aspects of human activity and the relationship between them... there is a constant living antagonism between abstract labor and concrete doing."

The constant living antagonism of the two-fold nature of labor, based on the understanding that capitalism's dialectical social relations are always contradictory and simultaneously constraining and enabling human activity, insists that our concrete work or "doings" are always in-against-beyond alienated capitalist wage labor. Rather than a totalizing coherent system (that is daunting to face), capitalism is, by its very nature, inconsistent and contradictory, fraught with fissures and cracks; the "sprouts" of its undoing. Thus cracks or "sprouts" are internal to the logic of capital and best viewed from capital itself rather than from some mythic, external or utopian vision of alternatives that we cannot comprehend. These are the theoretical realizations that provide the framework to envision a different future and a place for our archaeological work: to highlight and expand the cracks that have always already been an essential part of capitalism; to nurture the "sprouts;" to help dig the grave.

Archaeology and the Method of the Crack

Holloway (2010b:20) describes this "the method of the crack" as follows:

[T]his is where we start: from the cracks, the fissures, the rents, the spaces of rebellious negation-and-creation. We start from the particular, not from the totality. We start from the world of misfitting, from the multiplicity of particular rebellions, dignities, cracks, not from the great unified Struggle that simply does not exist, nor from the system of domination.

If communism already exists hidden internal to capitalism, the key question is where can we find these sprouts to nurture them? How do we identify the cracks to expand them? Holloway (2014:216) sees the cracks in the two-fold nature of labor; whether concrete or abstract, "there is a coming together of different activities, a cohering of diverse active subjects, some form of sociality, communality, some communing of doers, some form of communizing." The cracks can result from limited struggles such as teachers fighting neo-liberal restructuring, students' protesting additional school fees, or people battling the environmental and cultural impact of pipelines. Sometimes cracks form when a group of people consciously reject the restraints of capitalism and actively "opt out" (Holloway 2010b:23–25). Other cracks result from a forced expulsion from capitalist social relations, such as peasants and small farmers dispossessed from the land or those un-, under-, and precariously

employed, forced to make their lives in other ways, who have constructed alternative social relations based on mutual solidarity out of necessity. Holloway notes that there are differences in the cracks created by conscious “other doing” versus social exclusion, but what is important is not the classification or dividing lines (petty bickering over which actions are authentic, revolutionary or real and which are not) but to see the lines of continuity and connection among them all. This entails the revolutionary power to recognise all the diversity of different cracks as the same thing. Since this is contrary to the very structure of the academy, based on the separation of research domains, framing concepts, questions, and expertise, it is worth quoting Holloway at length:

There is nothing unusual about struggling against capitalism: anti-capitalist struggle is all around us. In all of these struggles, the potential of *we do* is hurled against the status quo, the world of *it is*. All have in common the idea that a different world is possible, that we can stop the annihilation of humanity. All of these struggles are anti-capitalist, at least in the sense that they are directed against particular aspects of capitalist society, but the general reification of social relations often makes it difficult to see what unites them. The revolt of doing creates a new constellation of many struggles that often do not recognise themselves as part of the same constellation. In insisting here that the unifying thread is the abstraction of doing into labour, the purpose is not to create a hierarchy of struggles, to privilege one form of struggle over others, but to deepen the cracks, draw them towards each other, contribute to their confluence. If the sheet of ice that is capitalism is being cracked from different sides, it probably makes little sense to say ‘you are cracking in the wrong place, come and crack here’. It is better to say ‘all these crackings are trying to break up the same ice, let us see how we can draw lines of connection, by doing and by reflecting on our doing.’ Instead of telling everyone where they should start the struggles, it is better to recognise the myriad forms of struggle and look for ways to make them connect (not to unite them, necessarily, but to make them connect, to help them resonate). (Holloway 2010b:198, emphasis in original)

Cracks are de-alienating interaction and creative doing, communal support and mutual-aid—little secret strategies to stop creating capitalism—by not following the dictates of abstract labor and its constraining time regimes. They are the overflowing of these structures with sensual doing. Cracks do not exist beyond capitalism in a communist heaven, they appear now in our daily life and archaeologically in the everyday life of those we use our craft of archaeology to understand.

Towards an Archaeology of Capitalism’s Cracks

If logically and theoretically these sprouts, cracks or alternatives have always existed internal to the contradictions of capitalism, we must ask why we do not see them—why is any alternative so impossible to conceptualize? McNally (2011:2) suggests

that “the very insidiousness of the capitalist grotesque has to do with its invisibility.” Holloway (2014:216) argues that:

communizing, like wealth, like doing or concrete labor, exists as a hidden substratum of a social form that denies its existence. Capitalism is based on an intense communality or sociality or intertwining of doings or activities, but the common doing which is the basis (substratum) of capitalist society is hidden from view by its capitalist form.

The capitalist vantage point makes the system seem obvious and natural, positions people to “see” from the perspective of the interests of capital, and makes alternatives nonsensical. We are being played, and this forgetting is a political act to ensure TINA. We believe that archaeology can play an important role in making the long history of the cracks in capitalism visible. People have not just struggled against alienated labor at sites related to strikes and labor activities, social protest, or resistance to slavery but wherever their labor power has been appropriated to produce or support the creation of surplus value. For historical archaeology, this entails every single site. Our goal for this volume is to provide archaeological cases and critical reflection of different sites and places of “doing different.” The strength of archaeological case studies lies in the powerful and visceral materiality that makes the everyday life of alternatives imaginable.

An archaeology of capitalism’s cracks cannot take the form of just slapping the tag “crack” on different case studies, presenting a new academic buzzword, or reiterating the differences and special aspects of single historic sites. Instead of creating dividing lines between research subjects or regions, we want to focus on lines of continuity. Cracks do not exist separately but internal to all aspects of the human experience in capitalism. For this reason, our charge is to rethink the archaeology of capitalism by foregrounding the cracks instead of approaching our studies with the conceptual framing that serves capital. We do not want to postulate that archaeology is the only or even best way to make the cracks visible again, nor do we think archaeology has a privileged vantage point that is better than other disciplines. When archaeology speaks truth to power or produces histories that challenge accepted (capitalist) wisdom, we engage in an intervention to make it clear that cracks have existed as long as capitalism. Our role can assume that of the bard which recounts the tales of peoples’ struggle for the dignity of their lives and “doing” against the alienation of abstract labor. Songs about the histories and lessons of cracks are needed to counter the unified cacophony of the idea that we have no alternative. We need more artists, films, papers, and events documenting and talking about cracks—regardless of trade or discipline—because containing our narratives into different disciplinary silos will not help us see all cracks as part of our common heritage of hope.

Because most archaeological research sorts, structures, and separates events and struggles from each other through artificial temporal divides, it inhibits our ability to follow what Benjamin (1968:254–255) describes as the potentiality to identify yourselves with struggles and hopes of past human beings. Indeed, the key to cracks is the continuation and commonality of struggles everywhere that capitalism has spread. They pop up even at unexpected and distant locations regardless of time,

showing that archaeology itself can act as an other-doing when it reveals past cracks and common struggles and yearning for a better future. In this, we argue that our archaeological research into past cracks are crucial to the dialectical integration of present, past and future. As such, this research is internal to our own scream against the alienation of our own abstract labor and a source of inspiration and hope for a different future. In other words, our goal is not simply to provide dignity to those who we research, but to use the evidence of their lives in the cracks but to connect past cracks with present ones. Graeber (2013:5) notes that transformative events have happened in the past and will continue to happen:

The experience of those who live through such events is to find our horizons thrown open; to find ourselves wondering what else we assume cannot really happen actually can. Such events cause us to reconsider everything we thought we knew about the past.

With more time depth we can see ourselves in the past to see the commonality of past and present struggles against abstract labor and the screams to control our “doing.”

Cracks remind us of our dignity, agency, and humanity. We believe that an archaeology that embraces the cracks can foster an alternative conception of our past and present, countering the concealment, to reveal the cracks that have always been there. We need to reject the powerlessness and apathy that are manufactured to serve capital and question our own intellectual heritage that relies on concepts that reify our separateness and distract us from the cracks. The artifacts that archaeologists study represent market commodities created through abstract labor, but they may also represent alternative doing and collective action. They are our windows to look at the “other doing” of the past to illuminate potentialities for different futures.

Through archaeology, old sprouts and cracks reappear, old voices and dreams of dead or apatic folks re-emerge which capitalism hoped to be forgotten and repressed. We offer the case studies in this volume as evidence of how historical and contemporary archaeology can further these goals; to help battle the alienation that results from seeing the present walled off from the past and combat the hopelessness of the TINA Doctrine and the capitalist world of endless crisis.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10761-022-00690-3>.

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