

The Relevance of Capitalist Realism - Postliterate - Medium

By Postliterate

Source: <https://medium.com/@postliterate/the-relevance-of-capitalist-realism-4fac46bc657>



There are two things which from what I can see have now been generally accepted by the broader societies of the United States and Europe (or the “west” for short). In fact, most people from these societies have accepted them so outright and for enough generations that for many these things have become embedded into our collective zeitgeist as facts of life. The two “things” I am referring to here are: 1. The exploitation of peoples abroad by our capitalist consumption, and 2. The impending climate crisis caused by our capitalist consumption. It is true there remains some who may make excuses for the first thing and others who may deny the second. But overall, at this point in our development, most are in agreement about

the two things' existence. References or jokes to "sweatshops in China" and the scientific consensus on climate change has created a culture which for the large part accepts these two things as true.

What is most interesting to me is that not *one* of those millions of people who know and accept these grim truths seem even *remotely* motivated to care.

Why is that?

Let us now invoke *Capitalist Realism*, the concept championed by Mark Fisher in his book of the same name. What Fisher describes is a stage in capitalism's development whereby it has cemented itself so deeply into our culture and collective zeitgeist that it has become essentially impossible for broader society to see any viable and coherent alternative to it. To challenge capitalism becomes to challenge the very way that we *think*, and challenges to capitalism can themselves become reinforcers of it. The western societies have and continue to be broadly capitalist, and it is in those societies the concept applies.

The USSR, the largest threat to western capitalism, has fallen. The last of the organized labor unions have been wiped out by a potent era of neoliberalism, spearheaded by Reagan and Thatcher. China has been liberalized. The Berlin Wall has fallen.

Indeed, there remains no large threat to capitalism in its legitimacy, and Fukuyama has proclaimed liberal democracy "the end of history". Neoliberalism remains the dominant ideology of our western societies and it has wiped out the major oppositions. Neoliberalism has outlived and outperformed its competitors. From what we have been told, this must be as good as it can get.

But it clearly isn't. Even worse, we *know* it isn't. The same beautiful free-market forces that brought the iPhone, are too outsourcing labor to foreign lands, exploiting their people and their resources. The same economic system of freedom and prosperity, is too bringing about a climate catastrophe. In fact, this is obvious to most people, we are now taught it in our schools.

But not one of millions can even *think* of a coherent alternative. As far as we are able to see, there isn't one. This system is as good as it gets, we are taught, and so whatever children are dying in the third world are simply out of our reach. If the world ends, there is simply nothing we can do about it, because "the freer the market the freer the people". We cannot take people's freedoms away, we cannot disturb the precious "free market", we cannot imagine a viable alternative to capitalism. The USSR *failed*, we are reminded. This, neoliberal capitalism, is the best there is.

As Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek said, quoted by Mark Fisher:

"[...] *it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.*"

However, it goes deeper than this. Point this out and you will be called a hypocrite for using an iPhone. Point this out and the attention will be turned on you, and the room will ask, "what have *you* done about it?" as if it was *your* personal fault these issues exist, and as if it is now *your* moral obligation to fix them.

Capitalist oligarchs have committed large efforts to telling us climate change can be solved by individual changes in behavior, such as driving cars less. The "carbon footprint" and lessons in school about reducing water use have told us that as individuals we must change our ways. But we know this isn't true, it only acts to turn the attention away from systemic problems and onto the individual. This too, has happened to political activism. It is no longer collective action, but individuals. Not just at the ballot box, but in protest and organization as well. *You*, as the individual, have the power to change things, they say.

You can now consume mainstream anti-capitalist media comfortably and feel no obligation to do anything. But if you speak out, it is now suddenly *your* fault. Actual change, actual organization is disappearing and being replaced with images, spectacles.

Let us now invoke *Society of the Spectacle*, by Guy Debord, which details how capitalist society shifts the focus from real human experience and onto spectacles, or in other words, representations of such human expe-

rience. Being healthy is no longer a human experience to be attained, it is an image, a product, a spectacle. It can be bought and sold, it can be viewed. It can be consumed, but never truly experienced.

Anti-capitalist media becomes a spectacle to be consumed and then forgotten. You can learn about how brutal and exploitative the clothing industry is to those who must produce those commodities, and then go on with your day as usual. You can become fully aware of our impending climate crisis, and not feel the need to do anything about it.

What are you going to do, abolish capitalism?