

Ingerid S Straume and J F Humphrey (eds.), *Depoliticization: The Political Imaginary of Global Capitalism* (Malmö: NSU Press, 2011)

This split, so the thesis goes, aims to stifle any truly creative political critique of our institutions, thereby avoiding genuine structural changes that might hurt private capital's interests. In this view, 'depoliticization' is the diminishing of any public capacity to imagine, create or deploy new forms, such that the depoliticizing political-economy split is an inherently anti-democratic defence of capitalism.

For example, discussion on who should bear the cost of the economic crisis is depoliticised. In business, transnational corporations wriggle out of any democratic scrutiny exercised in national interests. In law, institutions and rights become fixed in a way that can tend to immobilise political thought and action. In the symbolic field, undermining everything, the capacity to think or posit new institutional forms is deadened by fear and indifference.

In this way, runs the thesis, global capitalism feeds on depoliticization, so capitalists promulgate it until the freedom and autonomy of a political life is no longer possible. This authoritarian state is, the book suggests, the inevitable and imminent outcome. However, this is not so much a warning about fascism's resurgence. Rather it is an intricate, provocative and mostly quite convincing theoretical elucidation of the subtle, sub-conscious architecture on which the current drift towards authoritarianism is constructed. The benefit of this work lies in the way it points out opportunities for a redesign: reconnecting politics with economy - politicising the debate, imagining and implementing new forms - becomes a key objective with a new and significant value.

Depoliticization assembles its tally of authors from five countries, representing over a dozen disciplines spanning economics, history and philosophy as well as political and social theory. There is a preponderance of Scandinavian contributors, but nevertheless the stated intention is to urge more transnational debate on our (perhaps Western) political fate and legacy.

In accordance with its central theme, the essays are organised in two parts: *Economy* and *Politics*. Opening with Straume's more in-depth look at how the depoliticizing political-economy split leads to personal suffering (principally, it detaches us from reality and creativity), part one goes on to dissect capitalism's 'economic logic'. Arnason cites Baechler, Wallerstein, Boltanski and Chiapello to expose not only the irrational 'spirit' that underpins its multiple manifestations, but also and critically, the social-historical context that spawns it all. D T Cochrane's 'power theory' harmonises Thorstein Veblen and Castoriadis in order to critique Marx's Labour Theory of Value and pin down capitalism as 'the valuation of control'. According to Lundkvist, this control commodity is used unaccountably by an oligarchy of transnational corporations to choke off market competition. Their strategically managed alliances and mergers give the lie to any notion of a 'global free market'. Instead

they spiral inexorably towards a 'capitalist planned economy'. J F Humphrey rounds off part one by connecting the discussion to the current economic crisis. He draws out from Marx how money transforms from a means of exchange to become the ultimate commodity: production determines distribution, exchange and consumption, such that what is produced has no (social) value other than to satisfy the need for accumulation; or as Cochrane might say, control.

Blinkenberg builds on this in part two, working from Jacques Rancière's argument that money as power requires the exclusion of 'virtue' (or perhaps 'social value'). Rather, an 'authoritative allocation of values' ascribes virtue in order to legitimise acceptable political actors. Here depoliticization is a method of 'value-neutral' policing that safeguards the hierarchical distribution of power against democratic egalitarianism. Changing the hierarchy's regimes for 'truth-production' by disclosing the function of truth, is what Foucault sees as the purpose of intellectual and political action, according to Jacobsen. Yet relativism, Foucault's 'tyranny of perspectives', means that any claim to objective truth always proceeds from an infinite regression of fundamental hegemonic discourses, dissolving objectivity. Such impotence is perhaps made manifest in Europe's Kafkaesque language shift from 'pedagogy' and 'education' to 'learning', as argued by Straume. Commodified and assessed by endlessly uncertain tribunals, 'learning' comes packed with a capitalist payload of quantitative, computable subtexts: competition, employment, product and again control are deemed virtuous for the 'entrepreneurial citizen'. The lost ethos of autonomous critique, inspired by love in Castoriadis' pedagogic scheme, is de-valued, de-personalised and effectively de-commissioned. Finally, Nilsen's analysis of Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* illustrates the outcome of extreme wealth inequality and a switch from 'productive capitalism' (growth) to 'finance capitalism' (no growth). This is demonstrably a grand repetition of deteriorating trust, consciousness and intelligence that sets up the apparently imminent, unavoidable descent into despotism and dictatorship.

But democracy's shallow grave may not be dug yet. If you're prepared to bury your head in the text and not the ground, you can find some genuinely useful arguments here. For example, Cochrane's frankly excellent reading of capitalism as 'the valuation of control' provides a strong theoretical case for competing to command assets socially. Similarly Straume's first essay shows that depoliticization rests on the inability to provide 'sufficiently robust meaning', such that teaching critical thinking to every citizen becomes a political as well as an educational mission.

'Depoliticization' is not directly addressed in every essay; for some it remains at the side. However, the papers overlap each other well enough to be stitched together with a good narrative, and so the eight authors cover the theme well. Collectively, they delve deep into

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capitalism's depoliticizing traits, often working at the level of language and meaning. There are some quite fascinating technical constructions offered in explanation of unconscious or unobvious shifts, such as: controlled 'free markets'; consumption determined by production; or money, power and control commodified for accumulation. There are also references to more popular economics (Stiglitz and Soros for example) and the odd graph (not listed in the contents) to explain relevant numeric data.

Given their intensity and density, some of the essays are wonderfully clear although in at least two, the author's purpose or line of thought becomes obscured; whether by poor writing or poor translation is unclear. More of a practical problem was the lack of an index; while the use of footnotes rather than endnotes means locating a cited source requires endless flicking.

But the only real issue was in terms of a personal take on ideas. For me the capitalist paradigm of 'growth' appears to be accepted without question, despite its physical impossibility. Moreover, there was a tendency to dismiss 'logic' or 'evidence' too readily, while quantity always seemed subordinate to quality. I would have liked to have seen these points more clearly and fully discussed, not lost in the background as 'value-neutral' givens. But then, this is not so much a criticism of the work as a rejoinder to the discussion; which the authors would surely welcome.

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