

CRAFTING A NEW CAPITALISM:

MATERIALITY AS PRAXIS

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This paper challenges the notion that the only way to progress to a post-capitalist society is through the wholesale destruction of the capitalist economic system. Instead, I argue that *Craft*—an existential state and praxis informed by the creation and maintenance of objects of utility—is uniquely situated to effectively reclaim these systems due to its focus on materiality over abstraction and its unique position as a socially aware form of praxis. This argument focuses not on competition, but on hyper-abstraction as the key driver of capitalist exploitation and its most glaring ethical flaw. Karl Marx’s work on commodity fetishism is key to understanding this misguided form of abstraction which displaces commodities so far from their functional form that they feed into what Martin Heidegger termed *gestell*, or enframing. Postmodern attempts to destabilize capitalist influence in the fine arts, like the de-objectification of the 1960s described by Ursula Meyer, often fell victim to the same fetishistic mindset and simply increased the hold of capitalism within the arts. The enframing worldview that Heidegger warns us about is fed by hyper-abstraction, and while he directly offers up art as the remedy to this situation via *poiēsis*, key moments in his writings on the related notion of *geschick* support this new notion of *Craft*, rather than the fine arts, as a more capable system for the rehabilitation of modern society.

The Problem of Productive Resistance

This paper is about capitalism. It is not a call for the absolute destruction of it, nor is it a listing and demonstration of its evils and failures. It is a plea for us to heal capitalism rather than abandon it. While rife with opportunities for exploitation and dehumanization, numerous sources reflect a trend of increasing life expectancy and standards of living coinciding with capitalist growth. Given this correlation, it is likely that something within this economic ideology contributes to this trend. So, the question then becomes, ‘How do we reveal these positive elements of capitalism while reducing the damage that typically accompanies them?’

Is it possible to embrace capitalism in a way that avoids our own eventual exploitation? I will argue that *Craft* is uniquely situated to effectively reclaim the systems of capitalism—instead of outright destroying them—due to its focus on materiality over abstraction and its unique position as a socially aware form of praxis. Furthermore, the repurposing of capitalist systems through a new socio-economic praxis would rehabilitate the entire capitalist enterprise away from exploitation and toward a more responsible economic system.

I am not referring to specific traditional crafts as defined by media and technique. Here, *Craft* is an existential state and praxis informed by the creation and maintenance of objects of utility. Within this praxis, one seeks quality in the final product as well as one’s process through self-development and the benefit of another being. The focus on useful objects grounds this praxis within an objective and pragmatic reality where one’s actions directly affect others and their world. From this starting point, Marx’s work on commodity fetishism as the abstraction of material reality pairs with Heidegger’s philosophical analysis of modern industrial technologies.

With this foundation we see how the steady de-objectification of artworks in the 1960s, as explored by Ursula Meyer, caused fine art to slip into a capitalist framework. This will illustrate how Heidegger's writings support *Craft*, rather than the fine arts, as a more capable system for the rehabilitation of modern society.

Capitalism and Economic Abstraction

One of Capitalism's major pitfalls is how it encourages the hyper-abstraction of people and materials. Marx details this process by analyzing the abstraction of commodities—anything that “satisfies human needs of whatever kind”—into exchange-values, where “use-values of one kind exchange for use-values of another kind.”¹ This allows one to trade food for clothing based on a standard conversion measured by a third kind of material. Otherwise, one would have to establish how much food is equal to the warmth of a certain amount of clothing, which is impossible to do. Exchange-value is a “mode of expression” meant to simplify trade.²

Exchange-values allow for the pursuit of a robust economy through the low-level abstraction of material goods. This is not an inherently negative system. One can see how a system without such a standard is easily exploited as supply and demand become the sole arbiters of value. Setting universal exchange-values and seeing that they are honored appropriately limits the threat of discrimination based on race, gender, religion, etc. Standard exchange-values provide a concrete reference that reveals foul play.

However, exchange-value is hardly immune to exploitation since it relies on a money form for its measurement. Capitalist systems with little oversight encourage the hoarding of

¹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes, intro. Ernest Mandel (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 126.

² *Ibid.*, 127.

money, which feeds into commodity fetishism. Fetishism is the phenomenon where “products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own.”³ The immaterial and abstract property of exchange-value—expressed through money—is perceived as a real commodity instead of just a symbol of value. Its tempering properties are thus obscured as it takes on a form alien to its initial purpose.

When considering Heidegger’s concept of *gestell*, or enframing, we see that it is the driving force behind commodity fetishism. As a worldview it reduces everything to consumable resources that easily fit into a homogenized value structure.⁴ Qualitative estimation of the world is discouraged as it distracts from the efficiency of a hyper-abstracted exchange-value system. Enframing feeds the quantifying and abstracting approach needed to fully reduce material goods into homogenous exchange-values that seem natural and real.⁵ A *Craft* praxis, with its innate focus on achieving quality results through material means provides a strong resistance to this death spiral of abstraction.

De-objectification and Existential Abstraction

Craft is unique in its foundational connection to real objects of utility. When these objects are deemphasized or disregarded, that anchor in materiality is lost along with any existential significance and clarity. Even the most disinterested idealism is rooted in one’s experience as a being interacting with objects. The very notion of agency is based on empirical evidence that our actions and intentions can be materialized as real tangible things, as Marx describes:

³ Ibid., 165.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 319-20; 332.

⁵ Marx, *Capital* 150.

Raw material is consumed by being changed, formed by labour, and the instrument of labour is consumed by being used up in the process, worn out. [...] But labour is not only consumed, but also at the same time fixed, converted from the form of activity into the form of the object; materialized; as a modification of the object, it modifies its own form and changes from activity into being.⁶

Marx is speaking here of labor transformed into an ontological expression of agency. The energy that composes and binds our bodies is crystallized into a real and verifiable thing that occupies the same world. When the gravity of this relationship with objects is overlooked, the corrupt abstraction that occurs within the enframing mentality of commodity fetishism becomes a threat to our collective well being.

In her 1969 essay on Radical Abstraction, Ursula Meyer makes the bold claim that, “Radical Abstraction is against the very fibre of our acquisitive society. The objective reality is the absence of the object.”⁷ This movement focussed on the literal de-objectification of art via “abstraction for its own sake” utilizing fragile and ephemeral materials “indicative of the loss of power not only over the object but of the object itself.”⁸ Simultaneously, concept became the focal point of de-objectified artworks. The goal was to reduce the alienation of the viewer by breaking down the defined boundaries of the object.⁹ Such a view presumes that one can never truly comprehend any sort of object beyond the self due to its distinction from the thinking and verifiable self. This assumption is challenged by the notion that consciousness is a phenomenon directly resulting from material events. Such a view is based on the innate similarities between not just the classically isolated body and mind, but also every being, object, and related concept

⁶ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 300.

⁷ Ursula Meyer, “De-Objectification of the Object” in *The Object*, ed. Antony Hudek, (Boston: MIT Press, 2015), 132.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁹ *Ibid.*

within the universe. All are comprised of and affected by the same array of matter and energy as Marx was alluding to.

I propose Meyer’s praise of abstraction as a liberating force to be misguided. It is, in fact, evidence of an explicitly capitalist approach to existence shrouded behind the same rationalizations and perceptual distortions found within enframing. When Meyer writes about “the idea of object” as present in what others may perceive as “cold and inhuman” artworks, she falls victim to the same epistemological device explored above that perpetuates commodity fetishism.¹⁰ She implies that some immaterial ideal of all ‘objects’ predates any sort of material manifestation of the concept. Thus, when recounting the works of Dan Flavin, Tony Smith, and Bill Bollinger, overtures on the destruction of “the object’s objective boundaries,” or the crushing of the object “under the weight of its own *Gestalt*,” or some “confrontation with the very nonexistence of the object” are found wanting.^{11 12}



Fig. 1. *Monument for V Tatlin*, 1969, by Dan Flavin. (Left)

Fig. 2. *Die*, 1962, by Tony Smith. (Center)

Fig. 3 *Rope Piece*, 1969, by Bill Bollinger. (Right)

¹⁰ Ibid., 129.

¹¹ Ibid., 129-30.

¹² Fig. 1-3, respectively.

When applied to the things made by these artists, such descriptions are meaningless. The very notion of an object is rooted in and dependent on its materiality and to deny or overlook this is a disservice to both the materials consumed and labor expended in the creation of each artwork.

De-objectification is in fact a generalized form of commodity fetishism operating through the same mechanisms of abstraction. It is the abstraction of a system of abstraction and that enables an enframing mentality to more effectively hide the nuances of these systems from view. Even if the artworks resist commodification, they perpetuate the abstractive cognitive framework that makes commodification problematic to begin with.

The Path Forward

To understand how *Craft* can navigate us out of the hyper-abstracted world of unrestrained capitalism, we must perform a quick review of a few key terms in Heidegger. We have already introduced enframing, but only alongside the terms *poiēsis* and *technē* can we see how enframing itself is not an entirely evil or undesirable thing. *Poiēsis* is the bringing-forth of something into being and its revelation as truth.¹³ *Technē* is a specific form of *poiēsis* that utilizes tools and general technology.¹⁴ Enframing acts in opposition to *poiēsis*, concealing truth behind quantification.¹⁵

The critical danger of enframing as a worldview is the threat “that everything will present itself only in the unconcealment of standing-reserve”—just measured resources to be exploited.¹⁶ Art is seen as the best tool to counter enframing due to its dual nature of creation and reflection.

¹³ Heidegger, 317.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 318-9.

¹⁶ Ibid., 339.

As a tool of *poiēsis*—as *technē*—it is part of humanity’s quest for a deeper sort of truth that the hyper-abstraction of capitalism cannot grasp.

Poiēsis and *technē* are active processes that we initiate, but what is available to us in this situation is determined by what Heidegger calls *geschick*. The term *geschick* is often translated as ‘fate’ or ‘destining’ as derived from Heidegger’s own translation as “to send.”¹⁷ As he defines it, destining is when something is projected “into objectifying representation” that allows a concept to become part of history via *poiēsis*.¹⁸ There is an almost fatalistic view at work here, but when one digs into the nuance of this German term, a stunning constellation of meaning arises.¹⁹

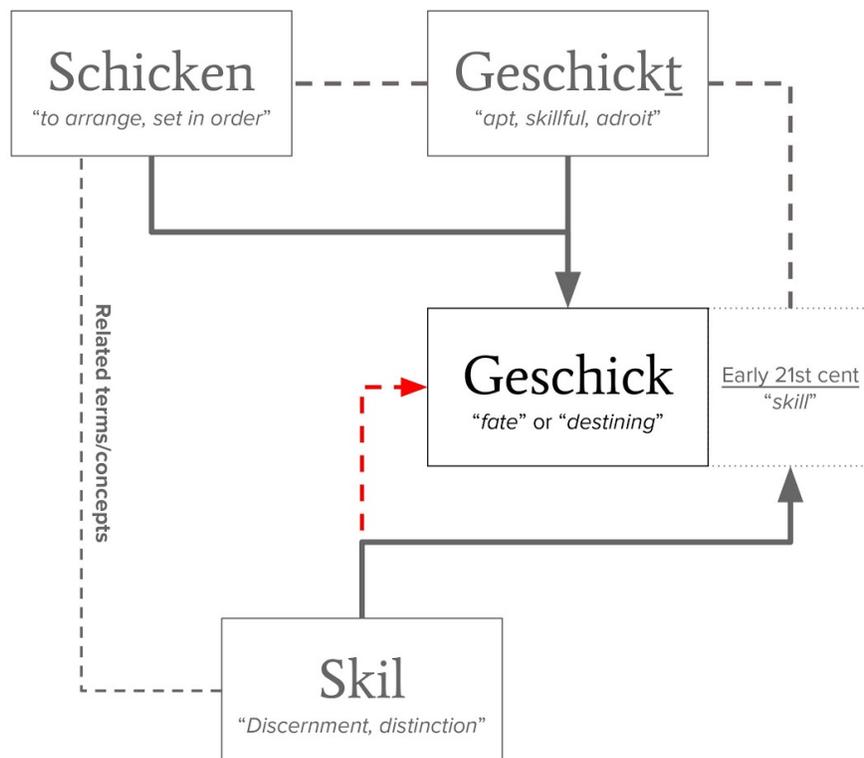


Fig. 4. An etymological diagram of the term *geschick*.

¹⁷ Ibid., 329.

¹⁸ Ibid., 329-30.

¹⁹ Fig. 4.

While “fate” and “destiny” are fine translations of *geschick*, consider that a more common contemporary translation is ‘skill’ which traces back to Middle High German via the word *geschickt* as “apt, skillful, adroit.”²⁰ The English word ‘skill’ descends from the Old Norse word *skil* which roughly means “discernment” or “distinction.”²¹ Both the German word and its common English translation share a historic root as another aspect of *geschick* in translation relates back to the word *schicken* meaning “to arrange, set in order.”²² With this shared etymological root in mind, exploration of the various definitions of *geschick* and its cognates within German reveals that the notions destiny, fate, skill, discernment, and ordering all hail from a similar piece of ancient Teutonic consciousness. Perhaps there was once the notion that one could acquire enough skill/ability to interact with one’s own fate instead of simply being subjugated by it. Heidegger even alludes to this when he declares that “destining is never a fate that compels.”²³

Here is where I feel that Heidegger misses something crucial. Consider also that in ancient Greece, art was not as we see it today. In that time “artworks were not enjoyed aesthetically. Art was not a sector of cultural activity” as it is for many today who stand in the wake of de-objectification.²⁴ It was more like craft practice as we know it which never made the leap from the mundane into the spiritual—from the material into the hyper-abstract. This is why I propose *Craft* as an exceedingly effective method for not abolishing capitalism, but reforming it. The nebulous definition of *geschick* and Heidegger’s analysis of art within Ancient Greece invite

²⁰ Friedrich Kluge, *An Etymological Dictionary of the German Language*, trans. John Francis David (London: George Bell & Sons, 1891), 115.

²¹ Geir T. Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), 373.

²² Kluge, 115.

²³ Heidegger, 330.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

us to take part in shaping the conditions of our world which set the stage for any form of philosophy, science, theoretical study—for any form of *poiēsis*. *Craft* is the conversion of *poiēsis* and *technē* into a new materialist state of being. It is about taking an active part in whatever process one is engaged in and reflecting upon that process in real-time with the aim of actionable results. By doing so, one can increase their skill and become more proficient in working with materials, tools, and circumstances to reach the highest possible quality.

This allows for increased agency and control of one's 'destiny' by avoiding the delusions of an enframing worldview. One learns to judge progress and quality as presented by real material objects that are direct manifestations and reminders of the labor that went into them, not abstract definitions unmoored from reality. Enframing is also kept at bay by the materials, tools, and circumstances of one's labor that carry hard physical and sociological limitations, some of which cannot be overcome without exploiting another person or object in the process. One must find a path within those conditions that results in a well-made object with minimal damage and waste. The closer one is to that process the easier it is to recognize objects as the artifacts of human effort and existence. Therefore, de-objectification and hyper-abstraction are recognized as harmful in their dismissal of both those who had a hand in an object's creation and the real commodities used.

In the wake of de-objectification, contemporary art has slipped into fatalism as evidenced by the many reactionary approaches to the ills of capitalism. When artists make anti-capitalist works—those designed to not only critique the system but for total incompatibility with it—they tacitly assert that its flaws can only be avoided by abolishing the system altogether.²⁵

²⁵ Fig. 5.



Fig. 5. Untitled anti-capitalist graffito, c.2014

De-objectification was meant as a rebellion against the exploited materiality of commodity fetishism, yet it only further entrenched contemporary art practice into the same enframing mindset. I do not intend to denounce art as a failed approach to improving our lives. It is not my goal to place *Craft* above fine art in a hierarchical manner. My goal is to explore how, in this very specific instance, *Craft* holds unique potential as a new approach to deal with the woes of financial and industrial capitalism in a new way. The negative impacts of de-objectification are highlighted not as the sole defining feature of contemporary art, but as an example of the cultural baggage that the fine arts have acquired in the pursuit of this goal. There may be other areas and forms of praxis within the fine arts that could be effective in the rehabilitation of capitalism, but an exploration of these areas merits far more study than can be performed here.

Rehabilitation & Resolution

Over time, capitalism has become a hot topic of critical analysis within the arts and philosophy. Since Marx's groundbreaking analysis of capitalist market structures and the rampant alienation within them, the discussion of this monolithic economic theory has spawned entirely new fields of study. Many of these seek to end the problems of capitalism, but have they? It can seem as though little has changed since Marx's work was published. Capitalism is still a dominant global economic force woven throughout much of the democratic political landscape. Financial capitalism has taken commodity fetishism to new heights which, on several occasions, led to the near or total collapse of national economies. It can seem as though little has changed since Heidegger identified the dangers of enframing. His revelation of how it dehumanizes and subjugates the world into a realm of hyper-abstraction did not begin an outright eradication of such harmful behavior. If anything, the growth of financial capitalism and the reach of contemporary globalization has pointed to just how integral enframing has been to neoliberal capitalism.

It can seem as though little has changed, but that is far from the reality of things. Capitalism is not a monolith with an easily described nature. It is a tool, an invention to be wielded towards ethical or unethical goals. Since the dawn of capitalism some 500 years ago, our lives are longer, our health is better, our livelihoods are more stable, and our level of connectivity with others has reached an intensity never before seen. Granted, there are still major problems to address. Some regions of the world have not reaped the same benefits as others. Wars fueled by hatred and greed are still waged. The exploitation of people and the natural world for profit

continues. The rising suspicion of expertise and the disturbing increase of hateful populist rhetoric casts a bleak future in the wake of this capitalist experiment.

Still, life is demonstrably better for the average human being. Data about better life-expectancy and lower global poverty rates are just two examples of this trend.^{26 27 28} If capitalism is as monumental a force as many claim, then its role in this pattern of progress should be acknowledged. Abandoning this system altogether or allowing it to collapse would result in the needless loss of positive potential. To ignore this is to disregard all those who are only able to live today because of these capitalist advancements.

The *Craft* praxis is a way out of this mess. Its celebration of materiality and search for quality within both processes and results, is naturally suited for the assimilation of capitalist devices into itself in order to repurpose their potential away from exploitation and towards a truly productive and ethical global economic system. For this reason, we must seek the rehabilitation of capitalism through a *Craft* praxis and an acute awareness of the dangers that accompany any attempt at progress. This is how we can navigate out of the flawed and overly abstracted world of unrestrained capitalism and into a more stable and socio-environmentally aware world.

²⁶ Max Roser, "Life Expectancy," *Our World In Data*, last updated 2016.
<https://ourworldindata.org/life-expectancy/>.

²⁷ Max Roser and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, "Global Extreme Poverty," *Our World In Data*, last updated 2017.
<https://ourworldindata.org/extreme-poverty/>.

²⁸ See Appendix A.

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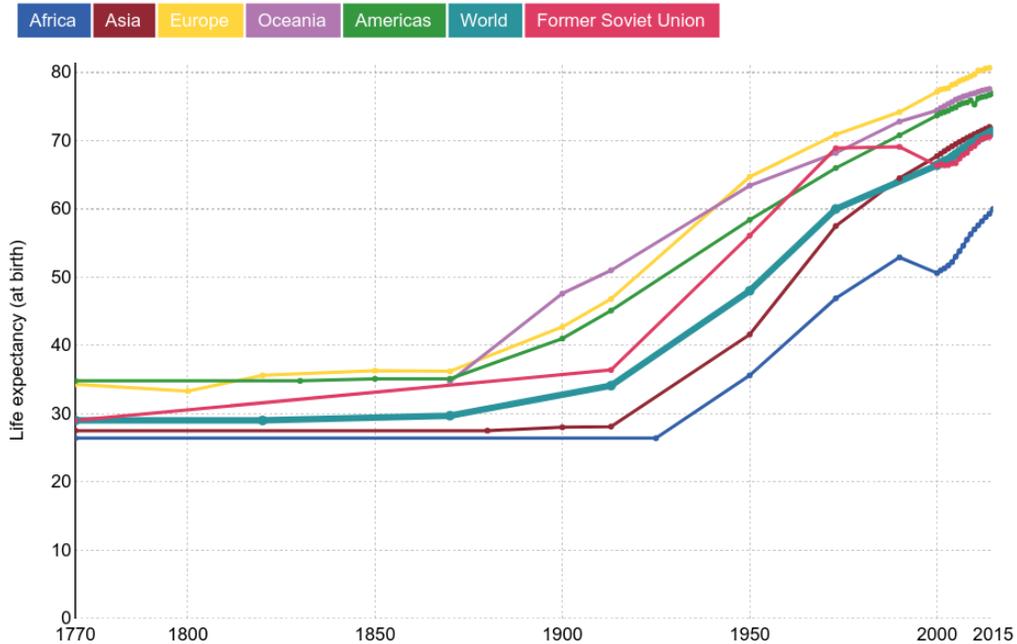
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Appendix A

Life expectancy globally and by world regions since 1770



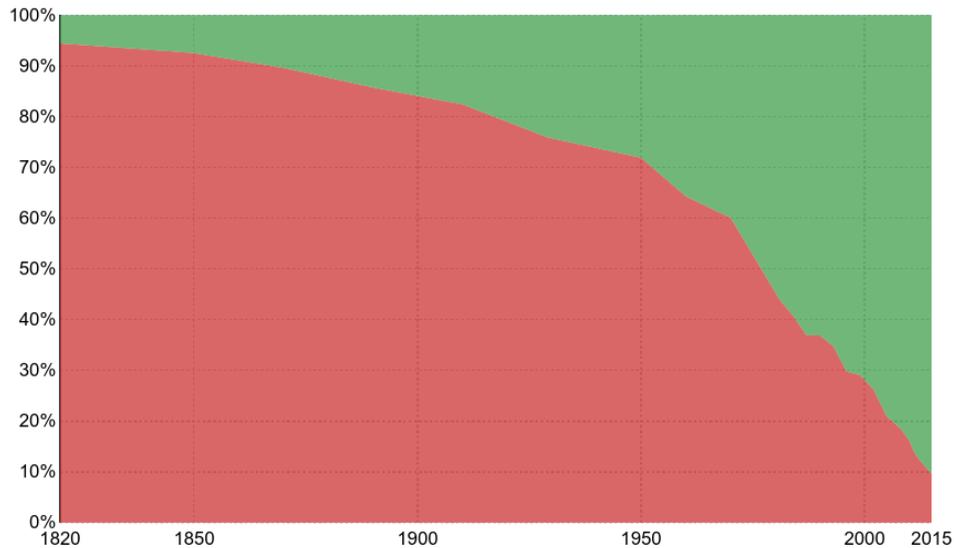
Source: Life expectancy – James Riley for data 1990 and earlier; WHO and World Bank for later data (by Max Roser) OurWorldInData.org/life-expectancy/ • CC BY-SA

World population living in extreme poverty, 1820-2015



Extreme poverty is defined as living at a consumption (or income) level below 1.90 "international \$" per day. International \$ are adjusted for price differences between countries and for price changes over time (inflation).

Number of people living in extreme poverty (Red) Number of people not in extreme poverty (Green)



Source: World Poverty in absolute numbers (Max Roser based on World Bank and Bourguignon and Morrisson (2002)) OurWorldInData.org/extreme-poverty/ • CC BY-SA