

You look nice today (or, the ‘values’ of capitalism)

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Dear friends,

Last week I shaved my head. Not a foreign experience, but foreign enough that I’m noticing feeling that I have always had but is now obvious in my conscious mind. Why tell you this? It feels similar to a critical awakening, that moment when you understand exactly what someone who carries knowledge really means when they say something profound. From the advice we receive, to the theory we read, the disembodied nature of much of our work and lives keeps us inside the capitalist frame. Making small changes, be it reading theory and finding a positional reality from that theory or exposing nerves through bravery or shaving which make us feel present is the human antidote to that disembodiment.

We humans are remarkable machines able to keep ‘grinding through’ but also able to perceive and transform our surroundings. Engagements with people, place, community, theory, reality, and so much more are fundamentally transformative to us –and this occurs regardless of us being conscious to it.

Today, from this *embodied* base, I want to talk about values and ethics, because I am noticing the humanity in the system and want to use my admittedly (relatively) small voice to raise that wherever possible. To find and reconnect with the emotional self that has been deliberately obscured through enclosure, colonisation, and so many more subtle (gruesome) technologies.

Capitalism, and particularly neoliberal capitalism [1], demands a handful of values, each of these comes with ‘caveats’ or negatives that directly undermine the 99%. Let’s examine some of the neoliberal capitalist traits:

- economic efficiency: money for the wealthy,
- individual liberty: militant individualism, concomitant with blame apportionment to the less ‘fortunate’ (itself a construct),
- intense wealth creation: for the 1% oligarch class,
- creative destruction: the constant change to justify more transactions, and
- unbalanced risk/reward alignment (favouring the capitalist every time).

These give rise to a range of resultant values desirable of worker (humans). This conceptualisation automatically makes us think in particular ways, from the language used to understand values and ethics through to the propaganda that maintains such ways of thinking. For instance, if humans are depicted in language as ‘workers’, workers inherently ‘do work’, ergo workers are human and around we go in an endless propagandist/linguistic loop. Rather than dwell in circles of stupidity, let’s do some examination instead.

Extrapolating wildly from capitalism’s ‘stated values’ [2], we might hypothesise the following desirable traits in those workers. And, to do some hard labour, let’s balance the ideal vs the authoritarian likelihood which we see played out through Trumpian politics. Our derived ‘personal’ values might be:

personal responsibility

In which we take initiative for our own economic advancement and never ask for external support.

Or, in an authoritarian turn, degrades into blame-shifting downward (punching down).

Workers bear all responsibility for failures (even and especially systemic ones) while receiving no credit for success.

Responsibility is weaponised to justify cutting social supports while simultaneously removing workers' agency to make meaningful choices about our conditions.

productivity and efficiency

In which we maximise 'output' and minimise waste of time and resources.

Or, in an authoritarian turn, is reduced to crude metrics detached from 'actual value' creation. Work intensifies as rest periods, safety measures, and long-term sustainability are sacrificed for immediate output.

Workers face algorithmic management systems with ever-increasing targets and diminishing returns on our efforts.

adaptability without curiosity

In which a willingness to be taught new skills and to accept 'pivots' as market change.

Or, in an authoritarian turn, enforcement of compliance with frequent, arbitrary changes. Workers must continuously adjust to new demands without questioning our purpose or seeking improvements.

work ethic

In which we are dedicated to our task, disciplined and commit to 'quality' as defined by the capitalist.

Or, under the authoritarian turn, devolves from any notion of intrinsic motivation to performative displays of busyness and loyalty. Actual effectiveness matters less than visible suffering and sacrifice. Long hours become a virtue regardless of output, leading to burnout and presenteeism rather than 'contribution'.

rational self-interest

In which we make decisions which benefit ourselves economically above all. This one doesn't need a flip side. But it's never rational.

contractual integrity

In which we bind ourselves to agreements and building a reputation for reliability.

Under the authoritarian turn, this becomes fundamentally asymmetrical. Employers/authorities unilaterally change terms or selectively enforce provisions, while workers face severe consequences for increasingly minor infractions.

It's a bleak and shadowy world under the Trump/Musk oligopolist future, and it's one that capitalism as a cancer has been driving us towards for over a century. With the achievement of global domination, even amongst the most remote communities, capitalism's need for domination and control now grows to our minds. This frontier -the one that separates current day 'western' nations from the neo-Antipodes [3] -sees minds as the last landscape for subsumption of humanity into capitalist 'value creation'. Be it neuralink [4] or the near inescapable pressure of hegemony, the active manipulation of our minds by capitalism is a project well underway. And so well equipped are languages, such as English, for the task of carving our lives into pieces that refuse mesh with our lived reality that we're going to need to take a detour through linguistics for a second to orient ourselves. Stay with me, friends, we're nearly there.

The English language subtly facilitates a separation between humans and our labour. Most notably, English has preference for nominalisation which transforms active processes into abstract entities – “production has increased” rather than “workers have produced more” – effectively removing human agents from the narrative. The passive voice construction further enables this distancing by allowing complete omission of actors, as in “products were manufactured” without specifying by whom. Moreover, English’ s economic terminology – phrases such as “human resources”, “labour costs”, and “productivity” – conceptualises people as interchangeable components in economic processes rather than fulsome individuals.

Similarly, English creates distance between people and their emotional experiences through linguistic externalisation. Emotions are frequently framed as separate entities that act upon us (“fear gripped her”) rather than embodied experiences. Our language’ s reliance on container metaphors, being “in love” or “full of anger” , reinforces this separation and treats emotions as distinct *substances* or *locations* separate from us. This externalisation creates conceptual boundaries between people and our feelings –all this distance manufactured in the way our language is shaped. Ever wondered why board meetings use such abstract language in their papers and discussions? Hmmm.

The rigid subject-verb-object structure of English further reinforces these separations by linguistically distinguishing actors from what they act upon. When we say “I built the house” , the structure creates inherent distance between builder and creation. This grammatical foundation, combined with increasingly specialised economic vocabulary, makes it remarkably easy to discuss products, processes, and emotions as detached from human experience. While this linguistic distancing enables certain forms of abstract thinking, it also facilitates a conceptual separation that has been used to normalise the alienation of workers from our labour and people from our emotions. This, a power move, a deliberate separation, a capitalist initiative, serves the particular economic and social arrangements that reinforce the hegemony of the 1%. So the method of exchange of ideas itself is deeply coloured by the capitalist ontology that frames our economic mode –thereby also conditioning the ontological reality in which we exist.

These linguistic patterns serve capital’ s interests, making the relations of production appear as natural, inevitable facts rather than socially constructed arrangements that could be transformed. Just as capitalism extracts surplus value from labour while obscuring this exploitation, English extracts human agency from discourse while presenting this separation as “how language naturally works”. Oh it is but the deepening logic of commodity fetishism, casually penetrating even our grammar for the world. A joy –sorry do I come off as not thrilled?

When language habitually separates humans from our labour through passive constructions and nominalisation, it naturalises the value of ‘productivity and efficiency’ as abstract imperatives divorced from human experience. Workers are linguistically transformed into resources that should maximise our output, rather than creative beings engaged in ... any kind of activity. The grammatical distancing mirrors and strengthens the ideological distancing required to view humans primarily as productive units. Moreover, the externalisation of emotions in English (“anger overtook me”) linguistically reinforces the value of rational self-interest by framing emotions as disruptive external forces to be controlled or suppressed rather than integral aspects of decision-making. This supports the capitalist ideal of the worker as a rational calculator unswayed by emotional considerations. Similarly, the subject-object distinction in English grammar reflects and reinforces contractual integrity as a value that requires clear boundaries between parties. This linguistic structure facilitates thinking about labour relationships as transactions between separate entities rather than collaborative human endeavours.

Under an authoritarian turn, these linguistic patterns become even more significant. As language increasingly obscures human agency in economic processes, it becomes easier to de-

mand personal responsibility from workers while denying us power. The conceptual separation enabled by language makes it possible to maintain contradictory expectations –workers bear all responsibility for outcomes while having minimal control over conditions, precisely because our linguistic structures allow us to conceptualise labour apart from labourers.

But let’ s not collapse into language, or despair, we have an opportunity through language to change things.

Resistance to capitalism’ s values emerges primarily from the body. Bold claim, ey. This is the site where productivity demands, emotional management, and contractual obligations are most acutely felt and most persistently contested –in our very *bodies*. The *embodied* subject refuses complete reduction to economic utility through (even small) practices of defiance. Choosing rest despite productivity imperatives, experiencing emotions that disrupt rational calculation, or creating physical spaces where different values can flourish, for instance. This resistance operates *linguistically* when we deliberately restructure our speech to foreground human agency, replacing passive constructions with active declarations of collective power. “We built this” instead of “this was built” –naming and actively centring agency in language as an act of political assertion, and not a particularly hard one at that. Similarly, we might honour embodied temporality (hunger, fatigue, desire, illness) that follow organics which are incompatible with capitalist time, this can constitute a *temporal* rebellion against the demand for constant acceleration. Our bodies here might become a site where alternative values can be physically enacted through practices which capitalism cannot easily recuperate, for instance shared joy without consumption, communal pleasure requiring no purchase, or collective grief that builds solidarity rather than isolation. Hello resistance.

Embodied resistances don’t seek some mythical pre-capitalist purity [5] instead we construct new possibilities (within and) against existing conditions, recognising lines of flight [6]. Resistance includes performative contradictions that exploit the gaps between prescribed roles and lived experience. Be it “quiet quitting” : the worker who appears productive while doing nothing of market value, or the activist who creates temporary autonomous zones where hierarchies (temporarily) dissolve –active or passive, resistance is everything against these capitalist values and ethics. The spatial reappropriations create real spaces where dominant values are suspended, and alternatives practiced –counter-hegemonies. What makes such resistance particularly potent is its recognition that power is productive, and thus, effective resistance doesn’ t just defy capitalist values but actively creates alternatives through (embodied) practices, or praxes. The body that refuses to separate itself from its labour, that insists on experiencing emotions as integral rather than external, and that builds community through shared vulnerability enacts a politics where abstract values are constantly brought back to their material consequences, challenging the linguistic and conceptual separations upon which capitalism depends.

So, you know, preaching a practice I’ ve yet to master –get back in your body, folks.

With love,

Aidan

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1. which I’ ve begun elsewhere to argue is fading away in favour of something much worse –a fascist capitalism.
 2. these are extremely hard to pin down in an agreeable way. And therein lies some of the problem, the actual ‘pain’ that is capitalism demands indescribability –and through its production of language tropes creates division and distraction from its reality. Nasty piece of ‘intellectual’ work.

3. here I mean to say ideological communities which may fall beyond the reach of deep-seated post-neoliberal capitalism through their ideological distance from capitalism's western centre.
4. Musk's literal mind control project.
5. And just what the fuck would that even be, let's be real, none of us have a non-polluted view of what "pre-capitalism" was anyway. Everything is told through interpretation on interpretation. Get out of here "cave man living" .
6. Hello Deleuze -no, I still don't understand your work.