

Hutter, Michael

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[Book Review] Eduardo de la Fuente and Peter Murphy: Aesthetic Capitalism

Thesis Eleven

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Eduardo de la Fuente and Peter Murphy
Aesthetic Capitalism
(Leiden: Brill)

Reviewed by: Michael Hutter, Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (WZB), Berlin, Germany
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This book gathers together nine contributions on a question that has gained remarkable interest among cultural and economic sociologists: are the arts, or a broader aesthetic perspective, in the process of changing the current capitalist version of the world's economy, or is the ever expanding capitalist perspective internalizing the arts and the surrounding fields of aesthetic practice?

The book is evenly divided into wide-ranging attempts to estimate the impact of various types of aesthetics on the recent history of economies, and very specific examples of what aesthetic impact might mean for those actors who actually participate, and those who observe them. Despite that difference, the chapters are held together by fundamental similarities in their epistemic construction. As a set, they work well in giving recognition to a process that might be as relevant for society's development as financialization, but seems much harder to grasp. The chapters even succeed in eliciting questions that go beyond the scope of the volume.

One of these epistemic fundamentals is Castoriadis's notion of the 'social imaginary'. Dominique Bouchet (Ch. 9) emphasizes that the logic of capitalism is one of capital accumulation through a spiral of production and consumption. Markets are not decisive, what matters is a logic that is driven by the social imaginary of 'betterment' through commercial progress. Art is driven by another social imaginary. Artists strive to 'create something new, not in material terms but in terms of the way to address fundamental issues, that is to say issues that, for humans, remain invariant over time' (p. 182). That links art to the sacred imaginary, which might replace (or

complement?) the 'economy' and its individualistic self-destruction with a new sense of symbolic sharing, an awareness of humanity's common fate. Uncertainty and crisis, Bouchet suggests, are as palpable for us as they were for the inhabitants of the caves of Lascaux, and once again radical artistic innovation offers opportunities to make sense of the situation.

Vrasidas Karalis (Ch. 2) starts with a similar imaginary, even if he refers to Max Weber's notion of economies as spiritual communities. He starts his accounts roughly in the 16th century, when products 'became the fragments and the scattered embodiments of the obsolete *communitas* of believers' (p. 29). Artworks have accompanied the many permutations of the capitalist economy. Pop art and its aesthetics were the most recent case in point: the free flow of capital between countries, the extraction of objects from the conditions of their production were paralleled by the democratization and 'de-definition of art' (p. 37). For Karalis, the capacity of capitalist logic to make use of aesthetic expression for its own progression continues unbroken: 'the greatest capital of capitalism has been its aesthetic negativity – its ability to institute symbolic forms and frame societal bonds' (p. 46).

David Roberts (Ch. 1) observes a shorter span of time. He begins with the early 19th century, when artistic bohemians and profit-oriented bourgeois were tied into an 'antagonistic symbiosis'. Since then, the productive tension has slackened. Key testimony is cited from two books that are used as points of authority by several contributors. The first one is Daniel Bell's *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, where he diagnosed the dissolution of the fruitful contradiction; the second is Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, where artistic critique is introduced as a new agent of change, but the effectiveness of its impact is denied. The creativity generated in the logic of the world of inspiration has its source in 'the inner world of subjectivity', while the logic of the world of projects 'is conceived as a function of the number and quality of network connections' (p. 18). The 'worlds' or '*cités*' of which they speak are communities of sense-making, or social imaginaries. Despite such sombre conclusions, Roberts does identify Andy Warhol as the one artist who successfully performed the 'romance of commerce and culture'. By destroying the auratic dimension of aesthetic experience, he deflated the capitalist move to appropriate high art for its profit-goals (p. 25). One might add that, since Warhol, the play with the auratic dimension has become a stock practice in the arsenal of artistic expression, from Jeff Koons to Ai Weiwei.

Anders Michelsen (Ch. 4) and Ken Friedman (Ch. 5) bring the discussion closer to the discourse in management science and economics. Michelsen introduces the sub-discipline of cultural economics, where expressions of culture are recognized as potential economic outcomes. Over the past three decades, the cultural and/or creative industries – there is a bitter feud as to which side of the slash holds the correct term – have been identified and statistically measured as the sector of the economy where the impact of aesthetic innovation is the strongest. The notion of an 'experience economy' claimed by Pine and Gilmore points in the same direction: products like coffee, once perceived as material commodities, are today the fragments around which elaborate and costly experiences are performed. Friedman dives back into early economic history to revive the beauty of money, which he recognizes as an 'information construct' (p. 99). Both art and commerce take place in symbolic interaction, and the 'aesthetic character and forms of markets and industries have influenced humankind since we first began to trade goods and services

with one another' (p. 100). Friedman suggests that the ambiguity of the two kinds of logic can be mastered in play, as in the 'playful economic experiences' of the Fluxus movement.

Peter Murphy (Ch. 3) adds detail to the Fluxus case, and he refers to a number of further cases. In fact, his is the first of the chapters that observe aesthetic impact on the micro level. His macro-observations, however, are also noteworthy. Murphy concedes that the capitalist imaginary has mastered the 'logic of creation' in unprecedented ways. 'The simple, stunning nub of things is that the more metaphors and paradoxes that the social system of modern capitalism generates, the more wealth it generates' (p. 49). While wealth has weak causal power, art is productive, through 'imaginative patterns that elude explanation'. In the past two centuries, the two value spheres have intertwined. The 'aesthetic stimulation of economics'¹ is paralleled by the 'transformation of art into aesthetics' (p. 51). To illustrate aesthetic stimulation, Murphy points to modernist design and literature as factors in the demand for products with the same kind of abstracted features. To illustrate the transformation from art into other forms of aesthetic practice, he presents a brief account of 'the art movement-milieu-climate Fluxus' (p. 53). He interprets it as a physical and a social move out of the institutionalized art galleries into the 'domain of the everyday', leading eventually to the 'beautification of the humble bathroom' (p. 54). From these observations, he deduces strong conclusions: 'The modern corporation either mutates into the art firm or else it goes bankrupt. To make something it must first design it. What a business cannot give form to, it cannot produce' (p. 62).

Eduardo de la Fuente (Ch. 7) goes straight to his historical case study. He assumes the aestheticization of capitalism as a fact. The emergence of the label 'neo-modern architecture' is his case. He develops a detailed narrative around the shift from the paradigm of modernist architecture in the spirit of Mies van der Rohe via the 'resignation' of post-modern style to a new version of architectural language. He quotes the architectural critic Charles Jencks who defined neo-modernists in 1990 as 'aesthetes who play with Modernist forms: their essential message is not ethical but stylistic' (p. 130). Then, de la Fuente turns to the consumers. They embraced the sparse rooms of modernism, but they appreciated softened versions. He points to the success of the products in the Conran stores, which claimed to 'reconcile simplicity with the emotional, spiritual and physical aspects of comfort', and to the success of the magazine *Wallpaper* as the distribution medium of a 'metropolitan life style'. The shift towards popular culture was thus completed. De la Fuente contextualizes his case within a larger process of aestheticization, namely the advent of high pop, pioneered by Andy Warhol. Since the 1960s, high pop has amalgamated with mass media products into a particular cultural economy. Architectural design and interior décor became part of the 'mass market circulating images of good taste' (p. 145). Neo-modernism, so the conclusion goes, 'is perfectly suited to a culture of "star architects" and glossy media, as well as to a situation where art and commerce have finally made their peace' (p. 148). One might question the adequacy of the peace metaphor, and the claim of finality. But the observation of factual debates and the analytical approach to the labelling exercises of the experts opens up interesting methodological perspectives.

The focus on details of the aesthetic dimension in social interaction processes is greatly sharpened by the two chapters that remain to be discussed. Carlo Tognato (Ch. 8) has investigated the aesthetic code used in political debates around adherence to the rules

of the European Monetary Union, as pledged in the Maastricht Treaty. In 1997, the German Finance Minister made such an attempt, but the plan was rejected by the president of the Bundesbank, Hans Tietmeyer. He used the 'crowning argument', a figure of speech that invokes final reward in the quest for good, for enduring in times of hardship (p. 156). The authoritative role of religion was transferred to the leader of an institution, who used a romantic narrative, performed with religious fervour. In 2011, the cabinet of Mario Monti was instituted for the explicit reason of averting the imminent default of the Italian state. Monti used an ascetic leadership style, which the media likened to German sobriety. His performance was 'that of an emotionally detached, competent and morally committed doctor'. After early successes, boosted by the (aesthetic) coincidence of soccer championship goals scored by a player of the same first name, Monti's aesthetics of sobriety were increasingly viewed as inauthentic. Tognato argues that the shift can be symbolized by two brief sketches of iconic Italian comedians Fantozzi and Toto.

Antonio Strati (Ch. 6) works with an even more concise case. He uses a few lines of dialogue in a novel by David Lodge, as the managing director of a foundry and a visiting researcher watch a machine that grinds cylinder heads. To the director's remark 'Beautiful, isn't it?' the researcher replies 'Not the word I'd choose' (p. 107). From this conflict in aesthetic judgements, Strati develops his approach. His interest, to be sure, differs from that in the rest of the book. He is concerned with aesthetics on the meso-level of organizations, as in the industry/university cooperation scheme of the fictitious case cited, while other chapters – barring Tognato's – address the impact on larger commercial processes, particularly on a new generation of immaterial, symbolic goods. Still, the four suggested approaches to aesthetic organizational research, which he has discussed in greater detail elsewhere, lead to the more general conclusion that the degree of analytical precision can be increased if not only everyday negotiations of organizational aesthetics are considered but also the heritage, the pathos and the playfulness of organizational life.

My distillation from the much richer material of the nine chapters involves, inevitably, questionable choices. It also skips over many sections that could not be squeezed into one account. However, two common threads in the volume warrant repetition. The first thread is the shared confident judgement that the impact of aesthetics on the capitalist production-consumption spiral is increasing. The confidence has a positivistic side to it, as in attempts to demonstrate the nature and the rise of aesthetic impact. It also has a moral side, as in arguments that advocate a betterment of the capitalist imaginary once aestheticization has progressed – a betterment that differs from the betterment of growth in GDP. A second thread is the close proximity between the role of the sacred and the role of the aesthetic in most accounts, including the brief introduction by the editors. Tognato brings it out most clearly when he states his Durkheimian assumption that modern societies still have a sacred centre, to which all spheres of social life are symbolically linked (p. 160). Arts and aesthetic practices may have been substituted for religious rites, but they still embed economic action. This centre-periphery model, the juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane, obscures the observation of other imaginaries, or spheres of value, beyond the capitalist and the aesthetic variety. In particular, it obscures the observation of the researcher's imaginary. Is that a political imaginary, or one shaped by the convictions of contemporary social science? Is the argument of a text critical with

respect to moves in actual events and to structural power relationships, or is it committed to standards of academic disengagement? A centre-periphery model will be of limited help in understanding a society with multiple social imaginaries, and without a centre.

Note

1. I assume that Murphy has the actual practice in mind, not the currently dominating paradigm in economic science.
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