

Moralizing Capitalism

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Recently, the study of capitalism and its history has gained considerable momentum. In an innovative attempt to combine cultural with economic history, the international symposium „Moralizing Capitalism“, which took place in Berlin from 14 to 16 March 2016, addressed the impact of moral sentiments on capitalist society, and vice versa. According to the Call for Papers, the symposium was aimed at „analyzing the interconnection between moral sentiments and capitalism on the level of historical agents, discourses and practices“. More specifically, as the two conveners STEFAN BERGER (Bochum) and ALEXANDRA PRZYREMBEL (Hagen) outlined, the symposium focused on the following questions: What, precisely, are moral sentiments, and how did they change over time? How did these changes correspond with new forms of capitalism? What is to be understood by a capitalist morality, and what role do moral beliefs play for the consolidation of capitalism? And to what extent – if at all – did social movements opposed to capitalism establish an independent moral economy?

In their introductory remarks, Przyrembel and Berger explained how they understand the term „Moralizing Capitalism“. First, drawing from E. P. Thompson’s theory of moral economy, they stressed that capitalism in the modern age has always been structured by moral norms and rules, which have often been passionately defended. Second, Berger and Przyrembel emphasized that social movements have often acted as important moral agents in the context of capitalism. All sorts of social movements, from socialist labor and other Marxist movements (see: KOSTAS PALOUKIS’s (Crete) paper on the archeiomarxists in Greece) to the new social and environmental movements of the 1970s and to squatter movements and Occupy (see: SEBASTIAN LOEWE’s (Halle) paper), have articulated a moral critique of capitalism. Within many of

these social movements, specific counter cultures and alternative milieus emerged, driven by the idea putting abstract moral values and ideals into concrete, everyday practice. As Berger and Przyrembel pointed out, social movements have not exclusively been a phenomenon of the political left. Rather, there has also been a wide range of right-wing social movements – nationalist, *völkisch*, racist (see: MARCEL STOETZLER’s (Bangor) paper) – and those movements have also often been highly critical of capitalism. Third, when proposing the expression „moralizing capitalism“, Przyrembel and Berger thought of a specific way of writing history: They aim at reconceptualizing economic history by focusing on the impact of moral systems in the context of capitalism and, like this, bring together economic and cultural history.

In his keynote, JÜRGEN KOCKA (Berlin) underlined that criticism of capitalism is as old as capitalism itself and, therefore, should be considered an essential part of the history of capitalism. After an insightful survey of critiques of capitalism in different historical eras, Kocka concluded that, in a way, „capitalism’s critique followed from capitalism’s success“. He also pointed out that moral arguments and criteria have played a central role not only in such critiques but also within positive portrayals of capitalism. Kocka identified several central aspects of contemporary critiques of capitalism that did not yet exist a century ago. As one instructive example, Kocka discussed the problem of structural irresponsibility, and highlighted it as a violation of a classical principle of capitalism, namely of the congruence between decision-making power on the one hand and accountability on the other. As a second example, Kocka mentioned the rise of the welfare state, which was strong enough to implement policies that would protect and bind economic actors. Today, however, important parts of capitalism have become transnational and global, without strong welfare structures or political institutions that could match the power of transnational capitalist interests. In Kocka’s view, this produces what he called a severe incongruity, as globalization is changing the balance of power between states and market. In conclusion, Kocka argued that capitalism is basically amoral

(not: immoral), although it can be made use of for moral purposes. His assertion of capitalism's amorality was linked to his notion that capitalism is not a social system or a culture but an economic system. This position, however, was contested by several of the symposium's attendees who argued against the separation of the moral and the market economy and stressed the social, cultural, and political embeddedness of capitalism.

Several papers showed that a broad variety of agents – social movements, but also wealthy patrons (see: SEBASTIAN DEMEL's (Mannheim) paper on Ernst Abbe and Andrew Carnegie), nation states, and international organizations – have had a striking ability to support what might be called capitalism with a human face. In all these attempts, moral arguments have played a crucial role. BRONWEN EVERILL (Cambridge) presented a paper on the Free Produce Movement in the United States and Britain, which aimed at fighting slave labor by promoting the purchase of goods produced by free labor. In sum, the movement's goal was to create an ethical capitalism. The production and consumption chains, however, were still reliant on the old slaving ports for trade, on plantation-style agriculture and labor, and on exporting for global commodities markets, as it was the case in the earlier Atlantic system. In a similar vein, JOSEPH KELLY (Liverpool) discussed Britain's difficulty to stay committed to its anti-slavery policy while, as a global trading power, inevitably being involved in businesses connected with slave trade. WIM DE JONG (Nijmegen) analyzed US-American re-education activities in Germany after World War II and the Ford Foundation's education for US-American citizens. The joint goal of these education activities at home and abroad was to propagate a humane capitalism as a basis for democracy and, vice versa, to foster democracy in order to make the world safe for capitalism. CHRISTIAN OLAF CHRISTIANSEN (Aarhus) traced the ideas of corporate social responsibility back to the 1970s, when the United Nations founded a Centre on Transnational Corporations, which, as a key task, should develop a code of conduct for multinational corporations. Due to internal conflicts and different interests, however,

the Centre was disbanded in the early 1990s. With regard to moral agents, the relationship between capitalism and democracy, and the development of – often ambiguous and contested – ideas of an ethical capitalism are inspiring problems for future research.

Central aspects of moral discourses on capitalism were linked to the idea of social and/or economic justice. ELSBETH HEAMAN (Montreal) focused on debates about capital and property taxes in Canada around 1900. She showed that political and economic agents wanted to deflect tax debates from a focus on capital to a focus on income, which was far less vulnerable to reconstruction by popular moral economies. Furthermore, moral discourses were often aimed at establishing a specific moral economy by either fostering 'decent' economic behavior (see: SANDRA MASS' (Braunschweig) paper), or by scandalizing what was perceived as inappropriate (see: NIKOS POTAMIANOS' (Crete) paper on „shameful profiteering“ in early 20th century Greece) or deceptive (see: MARCUS BÖICK's (Bochum) paper on the economic transformation in the former GRD after Germany's reunification). Likewise, religious beliefs were frequently brought to the fore in order to criticize capitalism on moral grounds. Such discourses could gain vital influence especially when linked to political interests and power (see: REBECCA AYAKO BENNETTE's (Middlebury) and GIULIA D'ALESSIO's (Bologna) papers). Concepts like justice, humanity, responsibility and sustainability, however, were often intertwined with an economic logic. RICHARD HUZZEY (Liverpool) showed that the single most important abolitionist argument in Britain's anti-slavery campaigns was based on economics rather than morality – in short, the idea was that humane policies would pay off in the future. Therefore, he suggested that, instead of a moralization of capitalism, one ought to speak of a capitalization of morality. SIMONE M. MÜLLER's (Freiburg) paper on the global waste economy raised the important question which goods should – or should not – be traded. Moral discourses on the question which goods, commodities and things must not be economized, however, have proven to be highly contentious. Thus, it might well be that 'moralizing

capitalism' and 'capitalizing morality' are, in fact, two sides of the same coin.

Moral arguments relating to capitalism can also be implied in concrete sets of *practices*. One set of practices addresses sanctions against individual agents who (allegedly) had violated economic and/or moral norms (see: JÜRGEN FINGER's (Paris) paper on bankruptcy in 19th-century France). Such violations might be brought to trial, as it was the case in the so-called promoter trials after the 1873 economic crisis. CATHERINE DAVIES (Hagen) showed that the financial crisis was viewed through the lens of morality, albeit with national differences: In German and Austrian courts of law, the interpretation centered on moral and social norms and on the actions of individuals, whereas in the United States moral arguments were tied to theoretical notions of classical economics and theories of money. BORIS GEHLEN (Bonn) read a paper on internal disciplinary measures at the New York Stock Exchange, which used legal action not primarily to enforce ideas of justice or equality, but in order always to maintain the exchange's smooth functioning. The commercial honor of the stockbrokers was conceptualized in purely functional terms, as they were seen to act in a morally correct manner if they fulfilled contracts and accepted responsibility for transactions. All these case studies showed that, within the economic system, there exist distinct rationalities, which are bound to cultural assumptions, social relations, and political interests. Another set of practices linked to morality can be found in so-called alternative economies and milieus. Very prominent attempts of alternatives to capitalist business are the ideas of cooperative housing (see: TOBIAS BERNET's (Berlin) paper) and fair trade. TEHILA SASSON (London) focused on charity shops in Britain. She showed that charity shops, on the one hand, aimed at mobilizing Britons as ethical consumers on a global stage, while, on the other hand, teaching the producers in the global South to tailor their products to the British market. BENJAMIN MÖCKEL (Cologne) interpreted fair trade as a symbolic practice to criticize and, in particular, to politicize consumer society. TARINI BEDI's (Chicago) paper portrayed the taxi-trade in the Indian city of

Mumbai. A community of Muslim, 'hereditary' taxi-drivers known as „chillia“, who have been in the taxi business since the early 20th century, try to resist planning initiatives to restructure Mumbai's contemporary taxi industry. A key component of their resistance has been the invocation of discourses of piety and the moral critique of failure of banks to provide „Islamic loans“ for the purchase of new cars. Hence, alternative economies and counter cultures aim at fending off global capitalist norms. Nevertheless, even though they may be based on counter models and idiosyncratic practices, they not only stay connected with the logic of capitalism, but at times they even try to deploy this same logic for their own purpose.

In their concluding remarks, Berger and Przyrembel summarized the symposium's discussions and formulated several questions for further historical research. First, they posited a need for researchers to analyze master thinkers such as Max Weber (see: THOMAS SOKOLL's (Hagen) paper), Karl Polanyi and E. P. Thompson, as well as to look at the historiography of capitalism. This would make it possible to identify how the production of historical knowledge about capitalism was intertwined with moral ideas on the capitalist economy. Second, Przyrembel and Berger highlighted the importance of agency and, in particular, noted that the issue of gendered agency had not been addressed in any of the papers. They claimed that questions of agency would also lead to those of *Eigensinn*, as people at every stage have reacted with obstinacy or recalcitrance, perhaps even resistance against capitalism's destructive potentials. Third, Berger and Przyrembel pointed to the relations between the national and the transnational and, more specifically, asked how the shift from national to transnational frames of references in 20th-century capitalism had occurred. Furthermore, they stressed that the symposium's few glimpses at the global south had shown that in these areas of the world, the problematic of capitalism is reconfigured in substantially different ways. Therefore, they urged the need for a look at capitalism and morality from outside of a narrowly Western perspective – a perspective that was, indeed, missing from the majority of the papers as

well as from Kocka's keynote, which focused on Europe and the West. Fourth, Przyrembel and Berger argued against Kocka's view to restrict the notion of capitalism to merely an economic system. Instead, they presented the image of capitalism as similar to an octopus, with many tentacles reaching out into all areas of life. They suggested that it was precisely these interrelations and interconnections that were the most fascinating objects of study.

„Moralizing capitalism“ offers a promising research perspective for a culturally informed history of capitalism. Kocka's notion of capitalism's amorality could be an interesting starting point for this endeavor, as it points at the fundamental role of anti-/capitalist agents, their opinions and beliefs, their know-how and knowledge, and their practices and techniques. If capitalism is not 'good' or 'bad' per se, in other words, then the key question is what historical agents make out of it. Historical as well as recent victims and critics of capitalism make clear that there were and are 'winners' and 'losers' of capitalism, not only on a global but also on a national, regional or even local level. Ultimately, this means that capitalism is constitutively embedded in politics and society, and, therefore, in culture.

Conference Overview:

Stefan Berger (Bochum) / Alexandra Przyrembel (Hagen): Moralizing Capitalism – Welcome and Introduction

Jürgen Kocka (Berlin): Capitalism and its Critics. Introductory Considerations

Panel I: Global Order and Expansion
Chair: Alexandra Przyrembel (Hagen)

Christian Olaf Christiansen (Aarhus): The Emergence of Progressive Global Business in the 1970s: the Case of the United Nations

Wim de Jong (Nijmegen): To Make the World Safe for Capitalism. The Marshall Plan, the Ford Foundation and Civic Education in the United States, Germany and the Netherlands (1945-1960)

Sebastian Loewe (Halle): Occupying the Moral High Ground. The Worldview of the 99% and its Artistic Representations

Panel II: Frames and Narratives

Chair: Richard Huzzey (Liverpool)

Thomas Sokoll (Hagen): The Moral Foundation of Modern Capitalism: Weber's 'Protestant Ethic' (1904/05) as an Intellectual Deadlock – with Signposts towards a Way to Get out

Kostas Paloukis (Crete): The Principles of the Class Morality of Archeiomarxists (1923-1934)

Panel III: Capitalism and Violence
Chair: Catherine Davies (Hagen)

Richard Huzzey (Liverpool): Faith in Free Labor: The Moral Construction of British Anti-Slavery Interests

Joseph G. Kelly (Liverpool): Supplying the Slave Trade: Transnational Trade, Corporate Social Responsibility and West Africa in Anti-Slavery Britain

Tehila Sasson (London): Humanitarian Business and the Emergence of Ethical Capitalism

Panel IV: Criticism
Chair: Thomas Sokoll (Hagen)

Rebecca Ayako Bennette (Middlebury): „This Unholy Principle“: Catholic Critiques of Unrestrained Capitalism in the Kaiserreich

Giulia D'Alessio (Bologna): US Catholicism and Economic Justice: 1919-1933

Jürgen Finger (Paris): Bankruptcy and Morality in a Capitalist Market Economy. The Case of 19th Century France

Panel V: Rationalities
Chair: Bronwen Everill (Cambridge)

Catherine Davies (Hagen): The Moral Economy of a Financial Crisis: 1873 in Austria, Germany and the United States in a Comparative Perspective

Boris Gehlen (Bonn): Stock Brokers in 'Court'. 'Commercial Honor', Deviant Behavior, and Market Organization at the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) before World War I

Panel VI: Alternative Economies
Chair: Sandra Mass (Braunschweig)

Tarini Bedi (Chicago): Embedded Economies of Non-Consent: Islamic Loans, Piety and Opposition in Mumbai's Taxi Trade

Tobias Bernet (Berlin): "... to be taken off the

market forever“: Morals of Temporality and Self-Restraint in Alternative Economies – the Example of Cooperative Housing in Germany and Switzerland

Kult 17.06.2016.

Marcus Böick (Bochum): Voting for Consumption, Fighting against Capitalism? Eastern Germany and the Economic Transformation in 1990

Panel VII: Counter-Cultures

Chair: Sibylle Marti (Hagen)

Sebastian Demel (Mannheim): Capitalism, Altruism and Empathy: The Emergence of a New Entrepreneurial: Responsibility in the Late 19th Century

Bronwen Everill (Cambridge): The Free Produce Movement and Ethical Capitalism

Simone M. Müller (Freiburg): „Garbage Imperialism“? A Discursive Exploration of the Global Waste Economy as a System of Environmental Injustice

Panel VIII: Morals, Capitalism and Modernity

Chair: Stefan Berger (Bochum)

Elsbeth Heaman (Montreal): ‘We only want to pay what is fair’: Taxes as Moral Culture in Progressive-Era Canada

Sandra Mass (Braunschweig): Nursery of Capitalism? Children and Money in the ‘Long’ 19th Century

Benjamin Möckel (Cologne): Consuming Anti-Capitalism: Moral Sentiments and the Western European „Fair Trade“- Movement

Panel VIII: Morals, Capitalism and Modernity

Chair: Stefan Berger (Bochum)

Nikos Potamianos (Crete): The Discourse against „Shameful Profiteering“ in Greece, 1912-1925: an Anticapitalist Morality in the Age of Statism

Marcel Stoetzler (Bangor): Nation and Race in Moralising Critiques of Capitalist Modernity and the Moral Impulse in Critiquing Moralising Critique

Summary: Stefan Berger (Bochum) / Alexandra Przyrembel (Hagen)

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