

THE PEP

GAZETTE

MARCH 2023

FOREWORD

The end of the Winter 2023 semester is close upon us, which means we are entering exam season. Whether you're wrapping up some big papers or studying for a timed test we wish you luck on your final course elements. If you're done your work by 7pm on April 20th or simply need a break, make sure to come out to our final event for the school year at the Rook. We're covering one drink at the bar (alcoholic or non-alcoholic) for society members only. This is until funds last. Please drink responsibly and have a plan to get home safely. There will be engaging conversation, as always, with some discussion of the future of the PEPS for the coming academic year.

On a more personal note, this will be the last issue of the *Gazette* published during my time as President of the PEPS. I've had the privilege of holding this position for the last year and half and I am very proud of the things we've done. We're a small club in a small university but I think we've managed to live up to our goal of encouraging engagement with and critical analysis of the political processes around us that shape much of our lives. We managed to embrace online connection to overcome the limitations of lockdown during our first couple of semesters and have had a steady on-campus presence this last year. I certainly plan to take part in PEPS activities as an alum whenever possible and I look forward to continuing to use this publication as an academic outlet.

A big thank you to Dr. Tammy Findlay for her guidance as we took on the task of reviving the old Politics Society and for her continued support and valuable academic advice throughout it all. I also want to recognize PEPS Vice President Natalie Locke for her work in both establishing this society and being the backbone of its operations right from the very beginning. Our reach on social media, our presence on campus, and this publication owe so much to your initiative and hard work, thank you.

Scott Ripley

President of the MSVU Political, Economic, and Philosophical Society



GETTING HISTORY STARTED AGAIN: RESHAPING IDEAS OF OWNERSHIP, PRODUCTION, AND CONSUMPTION TO FORESTALL THE ‘END OF HISTORY’

Scott Ripley

On the cusp of the fall of the Berlin Wall and collapse of the Soviet Union, Francis Fukuyama (1989) wrote an essay in which he argued that it was clear at that time that, in the grand ideological competition of history, liberal democracy had won out to be the best possible form of government. He believed that Western institutions like private property rights, market economics, and representative democracy could no longer be challenged by any alternatives, and that the years ahead would simply be filled with a boring process of minor adjustments to the status quo. In the last line of this essay, Fukuyama leaves open the possibility that “Perhaps this very prospect of centuries of boredom at the end of history will serve to get history started once again” (p. 18). I will not seek to argue against the points in his essay, others in more relevant contexts have done just that, but I will argue against one word in his concluding sentence. It is not that *boredom* will bring about an ideological challenge to the status quo, it is instead the prospect of centuries of *suffering* that will get history started again. The capitalist mode of production is responsible for the worsening material conditions faced by workers through both direct exploitation but also through the disastrous effects of climate change. On a social and an ecological level, capitalism will not be able to remain the dominant economic system of the world forever. The collapse of this mode of production is inevitable, which makes taking steps to change our economic system a necessity. There are movements that exist today that are challenging the ideological foundations of capitalism, and it is through embracing the change of mindset of these movements that we as a global society will be able to answer the question if not capitalism, then what?

The evolution of capitalism has been shaped by changing ideas about who has what rights to private property. Since the wide-scale adoption of agriculture across the world, the type of property that mattered most was land. There is evidence to suggest that societies centered around a class of those who “claimed to be the highest-born descendants of divine or divinely favored founding ancestors” (Widerquist & McCall, 2021, p. 26) have existed throughout most of the world beginning upwards of 5000 years ago. It is this justification that allowed for the formation of a land-owning class of people. Even as recently as the early seventeenth century in England, among the first places in which capitalism would flourish, only the crown had true ownership of the land and anyone else using that land could only do so through a feudal relationship to a member of a class dominant to them (Aylmer, 1980). Ideas about property rights changed throughout the 17th to 19th centuries as the process of enclosure was changing the relationship between common people and their own livelihoods.

Land use had shifted from having a communitarian element, allowing for all to have access to the means to produce for their own subsistence, to a starkly individualist focus on profits exclusively for the owners of the newly consolidated lands. Common people were denied “the bedrock of their economic independence” (Katz, 1997, p. 284) by having their rights to common land denied. No longer were people able to maintain the lifestyles they would have known for many generations. This began a process that helped to fuel the burgeoning Industrial Revolution beginning in the 18th century. People were less able to subsist on their own production because they no longer had any ownership of the means to produce, therefore these newly landless people came to make up a substantial part of the labour force of the growing, urban-based, industrial economy out of necessity for their own survival (Widerquist & McCall, 2021). This had a dramatic effect on the conditions in which most people lived and worked. The shift from rural to urban living was often marked by a decrease in one’s standard of living through exposure to pollution and disease in a dense environment. Working conditions were likewise much worse. Factories were often cramped and dirty and the machinery being worked on was dangerous to handle. While many health and safety concerns have been addressed through decades of protest and legislation, one common thread since the beginning of industrialization through to today is the alienation of workers from their work. Workers no longer owned the fruits of their labour as they did when they worked common land or plied a trade in their own home. The value of what workers produce goes to those who own the factories, the machines, and the raw materials. It is this aspect of private ownership of the means of production that most universally harms the working class up to the modern day. Capitalist notions of private property force those not privileged enough to be part of the owning class into unfavourable living conditions and into dangerous and exploitative working environments.


Capitalism relies on the exploitation of the labour of the vast majority of the world’s people, so its continued presence as the dominant mode of production seems paradoxical. It might reasonably be assumed that such a system would be discarded as most people who are involved in it should be incentivized not to participate in it. There exists an overarching cultural framework that affects individual ideological positions, what Raymond Williams (1977) refers to as “structures of feeling” (p. 132). These are ideas reflected in media and everyday conversation that help to construct our own ideas about what we think is normal and acceptable. It is through this type of ideological structure that capitalism attains societal legitimacy (Fleming, 2015). The power dynamic between those who own capital and those who must work for them is made to be seen as a non-problem because our perceptions of how property ownership should shape hierarchies predisposes us to see it as natural. The ability to influence public views in this way makes “normalization... one of the great instruments of power” (Foucault, 1975/1995, p. 184) available for the owning class to maintain capitalism as an institution despite the harm it does. So long as people without capital believe that the system will somehow fairly reward them for their

labour or if they believe strongly that they will somehow come to own capital and benefit from the system, those people will not meaningfully challenge capitalist ideology.

Can capitalism then maintain itself forever so long as it can co-opt structures of feeling? On a social and an ecological level capitalism will not be able to continue, regardless of its ideological influence. The philosopher Leo Groarke (2000) believed that “unconstrained capitalism is, in the long run, likely to be the cause of its own undoing” (p. 213) likening it to a spoiled child in need of discipline or an overgrown tree in need of trimming. Both metaphors are apt because the way capitalist free markets operate are chaotic, unruly, and will not provide anything productive unless meticulously managed. Groarke’s prescription is a strongly regulated or “mitigated” capitalism to stem the negative effects of unconstrained capitalism (pp. 208-211). However, this solution falls short of fully addressing the issue. Groarke acknowledges that the types of regulations he is suggesting are already features of most current capitalist economies. Ensuring that helpful regulations are adopted by the minority of economies that do not already practice them is better seen as a temporary solution that does not address the underlying factors that make capitalism harmful. It is not reasonable to believe that capitalism can continue to maintain its prevalence because of the contradictions inherent to the fundamental nature of free markets and private property.

The contradictions of capitalism will continue to harm society and the environment “as long as people in government, business, or other influential, powerful areas use cost-benefit analysis or the classic capitalism economic paradigm with its absolute right to private property” (Cooley, 2009, p. 365). Two movements, the rise of the sharing economy and the trend of downshifting, will be discussed to extract lessons for what kinds of shifts in mindset we will have to undergo as a global society to avoid the worst consequences of capitalism’s dying centuries.

Downshifting is a term coined in the early 1990s that has come to be associated with a desire to lessen time spent doing high-stress activities such as work and to spend more time on activities that are more fulfilling (Kennedy et al., 2013). This idea directly opposes the strong neoliberal current of hobby monetization and the internalized marketization of time that has been common since the term came into use. Adherents reject the pressure to have to use their time in ways that have value to market forces. Unfortunately, a major roadblock for seeing a significant quality of life difference from this type of lifestyle is the broader social environment one is in. Because downshifting requires taking a drop in income due to less time working, there are likely elements of one’s life that might worsen in ways that outweigh the benefits gained. Ultimately, for this challenge to capitalism to succeed at making lives less stressful and less consumptive, new structures and norms need to be established in the realm of work.



A more direct challenge to the foundational ideas of capitalism is the growing prevalence of the sharing economy. Connective technologies like the internet have enabled a greater ability for people to collaborate with one another and to interact with resources in a more communal and less individualistic way. The central premise of the sharing economy shifts our conception of private property. The idea of property is changed from one denoting stability to one that embraces fluidity and flexibility, a shift also reflected in ideas around typical employment from the emergence of peer-to-peer markets (Kreizer-Levy, 2019). The sharing of tools in particular works against the necessity of capitalism to broaden markets. Instead of every person in a community needing, for example, their own car or drill, they can share a common item, thus reducing the number of total items that would need to be produced to meet the needs of that community. The sharing economy is not compatible with the creation of the type of artificial consumption needs that an individualist society generates.

Each of these movements provide general lessons for how society can create an anti-capitalist action plan. Less value needs to be placed in monetized achievements. Activities that are fulfilling for their own sake need to be held in higher regard than activities that have a dollar-value attached to them. If, as a society, we can make it the norm to choose our actions for the quality of the experience as opposed to the quantity of the gain we can fight back against the cult of eternal growth that is making our present system unsustainable ecologically. So too does changing our ideas about ownership. By embracing property as a collective and not an individual good, we reduce the power of the types of market forces that also unfairly demand infinite growth. If we can slow down and make decisions as a community, we can focus our time and resources more effectively on ensuring equal access to goods and services. Our daily lives would not have to be dominated by work done under duress and the threat of poverty. As a collective, we as workers are in a stronger position to assert our control over our time and the products of our labour. Through collective action we can end capitalist cycles of exploitation and reshape antiquated notions of what it means to own something and how it is we can make a living.

History is not over yet. Our current institutions are by no means set in stone, they are subject to change and will change in response to systemic forces. Capitalist ideas around ownership, consumption, and production worsen inequality and cause harm to so many. These ideas have only remained influential because of a self-reinforcing dynamic of social normalization and power distribution. However, as the devastating effects of our economic practices undermine the ecology that sustains our physical existence and as people's spirits are broken by more uneven exploitation, capitalism's ideological foundations will erode. This is what must motivate us to change because as the wheels of the global capitalist economy wind down, it will be the workers that get caught in its gears. To avoid these centuries of suffering it is critical that we embrace more egalitarian and collectivist ways of working and consuming.

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(Kilpatrick, 2023)

WHAT CHRYSTIA FREELAND'S SHOES CAN TELL US ABOUT 2023

Natalie Locke

It has become tradition for the Finance Minister in Canada to buy a new pair of shoes specially for budget day. Last year, Chrystia Freeland wore blue to demonstrate the government's responsible "conservative" approach to 2022's budget. Now, her shoes are reflecting a similar message. The heels are simple, black, versatile. Her safe choice reflects the rising cost of living across the country. Families have had to prioritize groceries and shelter above all else, reducing "luxury" purchases.

The versatility of Freeland's shoes, to me, speaks to the continued financial struggles ahead. This is reflected in the budget highlights from CBC News. The section on affordability does not have a grand solution to the housing crisis or price increases at the grocery store. There are "small measures" (Zimonjic, 2023) to combat the issue. One item which has stuck out to Canadians is the increased GST payment to help with purchasing essentials (Zimonjic, 2023). However, it is not a permanent solution. Canadians will struggle for the other eleven months of the year, as the rise in GST is a "one-time hike" (Zimonjic, 2023).

The government announced a new savings account called the Tax-Free First Home Savings Account to help some buy their first home (Zimonjic, 2023). This savings account does nothing to help people currently struggling to pay their mortgage or rent. Only the lucky few will be able to put the account to use, saving thousands of dollars for a downpayment. If future first time home buyers did not have the capacity to save before, they are unlikely to this year without major policy solutions. Only those who could already afford to purchase a home stand to benefit from the savings account.

While housing and groceries are on the mind of government, Canadians are expected to “pull up their bootstraps,” just as before. Don’t make any frivolous purchases. Make smart ones, like a simple pair of black shoes.

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