

# The Plastic Reality of Capitalism

*by Fabien Eloire*

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**Two hundred years after its emergence in the West, capitalism has become a culture in the broad sense, a way of life, and an ideology. It permeates all spheres of society, including work and politics, and insinuates itself in children through education and the family.**

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About: Denis Colombi, *Pourquoi sommes-nous capitalistes (malgré nous) ? Dans la fabrique de l'homo œconomicus*, Payot, 2022. 384 p., 21, 50 €.

Since the birth of capitalism in the nineteenth century, countless works—from Karl Marx's *Capital* to Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*—have made it the object of study, reflection, and debate. Published in January 2022, Denis Colombi's book, *Pourquoi sommes-nous capitalistes (malgré nous) ? Dans la fabrique de l'homo œconomicus*, joins a long scholarly tradition as it takes up this theme on which much, if not everything, seems to have already been written. Yet, unlike many sociologists, Colombi does not present original research with new empirical data. Instead, he opts for the essay format. Right from the title, he asks a somewhat provocative question, intended above all to interpellate and concern his readers: "Why are we capitalists?"—a question he then hastens to qualify with the words "in spite of ourselves." In answer to this question, he defines capitalism as a particular form of organization of the economic sphere (p. 15). However, he also emphasizes that capitalism should not be limited to markets, firms, and private ownership of the means of production, for it also resides in the particular behavior of pursuing profit for its own sake—a behavior that is not limited to the rich, bosses, or financiers. In doing so, he draws on his in-depth knowledge of the sociological literature, which for decades has engaged in the description of Western society from every possible angle.

## **Playing Monopoly: Capitalism in Everyday Life**

This is no small matter, as it involves nothing less than “exploring the fabrication of *homo economicus*.” Fifteen years after Christian Laval’s essay *L’homme économique. Essai sur les racines du néolibéralisme* (Economic man: Essay on the roots of neoliberalism, NRF Essais, Gallimard, 2007), Colombi’s book stands out in that, unlike its predecessor, it relies not on a rereading of the great thinkers of liberalism—from Mandeville to Adam Smith through Jeremy Bentham—but on contemporary sociological studies of education, work, and inequality. It also builds on the many achievements of economic sociology, which has been considerably renewed since the 1980s via reflections on prices, firms, the market, and the state. The essay is nevertheless aimed, both in form and content, at a wider readership. Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Karl Polanyi, and Pierre Bourdieu rub shoulders, always aptly, with the series “Star Trek” and “Black Mirror,” the film “The Wolf of Wall Street,” and the board game “Monopoly” (p. 17)—the latter being a running thread in the book.

Given the subject matter, the use of countless references to Western popular culture is not at all incongruous—much to the contrary. Why are we capitalists? Because we are immersed in capitalism on a daily basis, both in our professional and leisure activities. Indeed, it would be erroneous to reduce capitalism to a particular economic regime. After more than two hundred years of existence, it has become a culture in the broadest sense and in all its components—a way of life and an ideology (p. 86). It permeates all spheres of society, from work and politics to childhood, education, and the family. In short, to use Marcel Mauss’s expression, capitalism has become a total social fact. Colombi sets out to demonstrate this point step by step and above all “from below.” While many works in the social sciences set out to describe and analyze the capitalist system and its effects from a macro perspective, the author chooses to approach the subject from the other end: He starts from our individual behaviors to explain how these are shaped by capitalism “in spite of ourselves.”

### **Economic Socialization, or, the Fabrication of *Homo Economicus***

The essay is divided into five chapters. The first describes what capitalist behavior is all about: rationalizing, maximizing, pursuing profit. Colombi shows that

this behavior is artificial, despite it being commonly presented as natural to man. *Homo economicus* is a fable, an unrealistic, even immoral and repugnant, being. Yet, who today would deny that each of us engages in some of this behavior?

The second chapter is devoted to work, and more precisely to the way it is regarded in capitalist society. Colombi asks: “Why do we get up in the morning?” He shows how, at every level of the division of labor, the force of ideology grabs holds of us and incites us to treat work as an essential moral value and as a principle of justice that justifies economic inequalities.

The third chapter takes us even deeper into the heart of capitalism. According to Colombi, the “in spite of ourselves” is explained by processes of socialization. Indeed, capitalist behaviors are not natural, but learned, which prompts him to write that “if we act in accordance with capitalism, it is because we have been trained to do so” (p. 150). Economic socialization produces a calculating disposition, leading to a very early awareness of money and economic inequality and to a view of the world as entirely calculable.

The fourth chapter explores how we immerse ourselves in capitalism through our participation in its central institution, the market, which disciplines our behaviors. As Colombi observes, “there is no escaping the market” (p. 221), whose rules of the game are set by the state. It is indeed one of the great achievements of economic sociology to have abolished the separation between the public and private spheres, the state and the market—particularly in the 1980s, a time when neoliberalism was becoming the ideology of the upper classes and the technocracy. The market thus appears for what it is: an economic organization that is historically situated and that is conducive to the development of capitalism. What neoliberal doctrine produces is the extension of markets. However, historical studies also show that there is not just one form of capitalism. The most recent form is characterized both by the financialization of the economy, through the power shareholders exercise over firms, and by that of society and everyday life, through the generalization of access to banking, credit, and financial markets.

## **Towards a Mutation of Capitalism: A “Plastic Reality”?**

Unsurprisingly, the fifth chapter draws a fatalistic conclusion: Given the mechanisms that produce economic behaviors, “we are condemned to be capitalists”

(p. 286). Colombi nevertheless proposes a reflection on the “next stage.” In his view, several scenarios could unfold, and, to use the language of pragmatic sociology, capitalism could be tested in a number of ways. The first scenario is that of the *status quo* wherein the system continues unabated. This trajectory seems rather unlikely given the environmental crisis and the contradiction between the finitude of our planet and the infinite pursuit of profit. In the second scenario, capitalism is overcome and abolished. However, two obstacles make this scenario as uncertain as the first: On the one hand, history has shown that revolutions are long-term processes and that individuals cannot be de-socialized and re-socialized overnight; on the other hand, no “realistic utopia” sufficiently powerful to be embraced by most has (so far) been proposed as a replacement system (though the universal basic income can be viewed as one such system). In the third and last scenario, which is the most likely, capitalism mutates as it has done several times in its history.

Capitalism is a “plastic reality” (p. 295), and so are our economic behaviors. Yet, expecting individuals to change their behaviors and to stop acting like capitalists is a blind alley. As Colombi’s “bottom-up” analysis makes clear, individuals are acted upon more than they themselves act. Of course, they can become aware of what they are doing and can thus transform themselves (a process to which this essay contributes). However, as long as social and economic institutions remain organized as markets, in particular via the state, on the assumption that individuals make choices in their own interest, *homo economicus* will have a bright future ahead of him. So... “What is to be done with capitalism” (p. 303)? And what place should be given to markets?

## **Confining Capitalism, (Re)creating Society**

Today’s financialized capitalism and the economic behaviors it promotes (speculation, the pursuit of profit for its own sake) can be considered, sociologically speaking, in terms of “deviance” (p. 311). After all, they are disrupting the daily lives of millions of individuals as well as the planet’s ecosystem. Even if we decide to let them be, could we not ensure that they disturb the lives of others as little as possible? The question would then be: What place should be given to capitalist behaviors? For the author constantly qualifies his remarks. While our behaviors are capitalistic, they are never entirely so. Individuals are subject to a plural socialization that leads them to integrate values other than those of calculation and maximization—including the

values of gift exchange, mutual aid, friendship, and broader solidarity, all of which are just as important for (re)creating society.

In the end, Colombi's essay fully covers the subject matter. In a context of transformation of capitalism, it succeeds in opening our eyes to our everyday behaviors, while also making us reflect on future possibilities. The text is easy to read and pedagogically written. It eschews theory and defines the concepts it uses in a few clear lines. Above all, it favors demonstration by example. For specialists in economic sociology, this book offers no special added value since it presents no new research findings. However, to readers wishing to learn more about economic sociology and its seminal authors, including Mark Granovetter, Neil Fligstein, Jens Beckert, Lucien Karpik, and Michel Callon, it provides a detailed and lively synthesis of works that take an original look at economics. Colombi thus offers an interesting perspective on this body of literature, highlighting its interest and importance for understanding the contemporary economy and its power, as well as the excesses and absurdities of the capitalist behaviors in which we engage—in spite of ourselves.

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