

From Capitalist Realism to Acid Communism

A Brief History of Mark Fisher's Concepts

Acid Horizon

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In this episode, Adam takes us through Mark Fisher's concept of Capitalist Realism, and how the concept developed across Fisher's theoretical writings. Adam focuses on how the notion is deployed in his 2009 book *Capitalist Realism*, and how it is reformulated in his Introduction to the unfinished *Acid Communism* text. Adam takes us through the aspects of melancholia and depressive psychology in *Capitalist Realism*, its psychological and social mechanisms, and how the question of the geopolitics of *Capitalist Realism* and neoliberalism shifted in Fisher's analysis from a Cold War East-West focus to one that centres the imperialist destruction of communism in Latin America. Reflecting on contemporary social movements such as anti-raids groups and school strikes, Fisher's optimism for a post-capitalist desire is illustrated through the reframing of *Capitalist Realism* in *Acid Communism*, a project which reaffirms that all consciousness is malleable and the site of an active struggle, a struggle haunted by the spectre of a world that could be free.

Hello Acid Horizon listeners, this is Adam here and today we're going to be doing another round of Concepts in Focus. This time I'm going to be giving a primer on Mark Fisher's concept of Capitalist Realism and its relationship to what he called 'Acid Communism'. Particularly, I'm going to be discussing how Fisher's theoretical outlook shifted in terms of where Capitalist Realism comes from, how it works, and how he thinks we can fight back against not only Capitalist Realism, but also the forces which are constantly perpetuating it, in an active struggle against revolutionary consciousness. Let's get started with Capitalist Realism first, as Fisher presents it in the 2009 book of the same name.

What is capitalist realism? In *Capitalist Realism*, the book, Fisher describes it as a pervasive atmosphere which clouds all possible social futures, by making post-capitalist or non-capitalist futures seem impossible. Capitalist realism appears as a total capture and dampening of the political imagination—"it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism".[1] Fisher writes that this slogan, from Frederic Jameson, captures exactly what he means by 'capitalist realism'. It is, quote: "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it." [2] Capitalist realism is not a faith in capitalism however, it does not require you to believe in it, so long as if you *act* as if you do, even ironically or post-ironically, because you cannot imagine acting otherwise.[3]

Fisher explores this social sense of hopelessness through Alfonso Cuarón's 2006 film *Children of Men*, and its depiction of a British state in a world where global infertility has made the end of the world an inevitability, yet society, hierarchy, aristocracy, bureaucracy, office-life, reality tv, the abuse of refugees and systemic racism—all continue to occur much like in the present day, for the people in this world cannot imagine anything different. Our inability to produce the future in the political imagination is something that, for Fisher in *Capitalist Realism*, maps onto the inability of people in *Children of Men* to produce the future in the form of children. They cannot even reproduce capitalism itself, but nonetheless, no one knows any different, so Britain soldiers on. The sense of ironic detachment where one lacks belief in the system, even as one acts *as if* one does, is exemplified in an early scene in *Children of Men*, where the government has gathered iconic artworks taken from the world as it is collapsing around them for the sake of preservation. Theo, the main character of the film, asks the curator what the point of such a building is given there will be no future generations to see them. The curator's response, as Fisher notes, is not one with faith in the system to deliver any kind of future nor any faith in an alternative order of things, but is instead "nihilistic hedonism".[4] The Curator simply replies 'I try not to think about it'. [5]

Capitalist realism, especially in its opening chapters, is a particularly bleak work, and resonates with Fisher's distinctly gothic disposition as reflected in his early thesis on gothic materialism and what one could call the 'middle period' of his writings alongside *Ghosts of my Life*, and of course *Capitalist Realism*. As such, the 'realism' of capitalist realism is a depressive one, the realism which believes "that any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion." [6] The affect of capitalist realism, is also in many

senses centred around the defeats of the Left in the anglophone world in the victories of our enemies from Thatcher and Reagan, to Clinton and Blair and the persistence of capitalism since the crash of 2008. Capitalist realism in the British context is the victory of TINA—the Thatcherite slogan that ‘There Is No Alternative’ at the same time that it is the defeat of the Miner’s strike, and the collapse of the Socialist Bloc in Eastern Europe.[7] In the case of the end of the Cold War, capitalism no longer needed to compete for the future of history, no longer needed to grant concessions to workers against the threat of soviet-backed revolt, and could hence declare history over, as in Fukuyama’s laughable declaration which even he cannot stand by anymore.

Nonetheless, let us go over some of the mechanisms or manifestations of capitalist realism in Fisher’s account from 2009. We’ve already discussed cynical disavowal, where we co-operate with capital in action despite disavowing it subjectively. This is common enough and itself nothing new, it has intensified and proliferated, but is not qualitatively different from the old beast of capitalist ideology. Further manifestations of capitalist realism, in a continuation of Fisher’s analysis of *Children of Men*, are specifically identified by him as becoming endemic in younger people—at least those he encountered during his time teaching at a further education college, filtered through a lens which now may seem uncharitable or cynical. Nonetheless, I think it is correct to say that given the contempt held by the British state and commentariat towards the youth and young people—as well as in the shifting of class and cultural divides in the UK to an almost unparalleled level of generational warfare, and the rise of ‘Generation Left’ in the work of Acid Communist Keir Milburn—that capital desires the kind of world of *Children of Men* in our present. They cannot abolish the young, but they can seek to abolish the youth of the young, the very ability for young people to be bearers of the future in both consciousness and action. This is something that capitalist realism attempts to achieve by cultivating a sense of what Fisher calls ‘reflexive impotence’ in young people

They know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can’t do anything about it. But that ‘knowledge’, that reflexivity, is not a passive observation of an already existing state of affairs. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy.[8]

Social atmospheres of reflexive impotence are inherently depressive, and in depression being treated as an abstract, personal, medical neuro-chemical imbalance, Fisher believes that it has been depoliticized.

By privatizing these problems – treating them as if they were caused only by chemical imbalances in the individual’s neurology and/or by their family background – any question of social systemic causation is ruled out.[9]

Fisher observes that in many cases the rise in depression has correlated with the rise in a new kind of depressive affect. Where depression has been historically characterized as a state of ‘anhedonia’, the inability to find pleasure in anything, Fisher identifies a new mode of depression, one that is inherently hedonic, in that one cannot pursue anything else *but* the immediacy of pleasures. The depressive worker has transformed into the depressive consumer, and in the absence of job prospects and the omnipresence of debt (particularly that of students) the Deleuzian debtor-addict, caught in cybernetic systems of feedback and control which keep their desires circulating in capital’s favour, and determining their directions in advance.[10]

In the book *Capitalist Realism* itself, Fisher tends to contrast the students of Britain with their seemingly more radical French counterparts, in a manner which would seem to be typical of an older Anglo-leftist refrain which laments the lack of a similar protest culture in Britain and nostalgically yearns for the days of May ’68 in Paris. However, Fisher himself says that this protest culture is itself lacking in the imagination of an alternative, precisely because of its nostalgia “for the context in which the old types of praxis operated”, which at the time Fisher thought as useless.[11] Could we not say something similar when it comes to those who see no other alternative to neoliberalism than social democratic welfarism which aims to return to the post-war consensus? Capitalist realism is not neoliberal realism, because neoliberalism does not exhaust capitalism. It is not impossible that the neoliberalism which proliferates and intensifies capitalist realism may die, and its lingering effects may encode the axioms of

capitalism within any post-neoliberal future, be it social-democratic or otherwise. After all, the British NHS was founded in the heart of its empire.

As I sit here, rereading *Capitalist Realism* for the first time in years, I have to admit its depressive aspects inspire me more than it ever has before. This is because in many ways some of the analyses presented here are what I can only call beautifully outdated. This is not because capitalist realism has ceased to be entirely, as a pervasive obstruction to the political imagination and the affective capacity to believe in that spectre of the world which could be free, but because in its attempt to totally capture such an imagination and affect, it failed, miserably. Whilst we may not be imagining concrete programs of political action, drafting up manifestos, and modelling the world to come, such a standard is itself unrealistic—or rather *too* realistic as if revolutions always had a new world to hand which they could simply slot into this one. That we are beginning to imagine, if not imagining already, alternatives to this capitalist world, or the capitalist use of this world, is more evident than ever in the ways in which we are seeing people refuse this world not in the form of mere disavowal, but of active resistance and the desire to desire differently. Schools have gone on strike against the destruction of the environment, against systemic racism, homophobia and transphobia. Police stations have been burned down in uprisings in which the word ‘abolition’ has become common parlance. Police deportation vans have been surrounded by everyday people until the police have left empty handed. Maybe it is not a question of alternatives in their minds, maybe it is, but the practice of refusal shows that there is a negation of the present world of capital in their acting otherwise. The scales have fallen from their minds’ eyes and in that space of refusal one can incubate a desire for the abolition of the present state of things, a space where one can not only imagine but desire to desire something new—this is the space of post-capitalist desire.

The desire that desires in refusing this world is also the desire that desires a world anew, a desire which has laid dormant and must be cultivated. This is the realm which as Fisher saw, was incubated in the movements around say Corbyn and Sanders in the UK and US, and despite defeat we have not seen this desire wane, but intensify as the left has been put on its back foot—at least now people desiring autonomy and emancipation *know* that they are on the back foot, because they know that they are now part of an active struggle. The analysis and cultivation of such a desire and of a consciousness which desires in such a way is the project of *Acid Communism*. Maybe today Fisher would recognize the beginning of a recurrence of Marcuse’s ‘Great Refusal’ which he sought to analyse in the *Acid Communism* text, as that which rejects “not only capitalist realism, but “realism” as such.”[12] In Fisher’s writings here, despite his tragic passing, we nonetheless see a new spirit of activity, even hope. Let us turn to the introduction to his unfinished text, and see what it can tell us.

Acid Communism as a text bares some notable differences with *Capitalist Realism* as a book. For example, the latter’s relative anglo-centrism and analytical bend towards the Cold War geopolitics of West vs East in the origins of capitalist realism has been to some extent replaced with the axis of the Global North vs the Global South. Fisher came to realize that it was neither the crumbling Eastern Bloc, nor social democracy that were neoliberalism’s real enemies despite them being the official ones. Fisher says it best here, so I cannot help but provide an extensive quotation:

neoliberalism is best understood as a project aimed at destroying — to the point of making them unthinkable — the experiments in democratic socialism and libertarian communism that were efflorescing at the end of the Sixties and the beginning of the Seventies.

The ultimate consequence of the elimination of these possibilities was the condition I have called capitalist realism — the fatalistic acquiescence in the view that there is no alternative to capitalism. If there was a founding event of capitalist realism, it would be the violent destruction of the Allende government in Chile by General Pinochet’s American-backed coup. Allende was experimenting with a form of democratic socialism which offered a real alternative both to capitalism and to Stalinism. The military destruction of the Allende regime, and the subsequent mass imprisonments and torture, are only the most violent and dramatic example of the lengths capital had to go to in order to make

itself appear to be the only “realistic” mode of organising society. It wasn’t only that a new form of socialism was terminated in Chile; the country also became a lab in which the measures which would be rolled out in other hubs of neoliberalism (financial deregulation, the opening up of the economy to foreign capital, privatisation) were trialled. In countries like the US and the UK, the implementation of capitalist realism was a much more piecemeal affair, involving inducements and seductions as well as repression. The ultimate effect was the same — the extirpation of the very idea of democratic socialism or libertarian communism.[13]

Here we can see the hint of a return by Fisher to the works of Deleuze and Guattari, and their analysis of the global axioms of production and trade which constitute world capitalism.[14] The bureaucratic, State-socialist societies of the global North are entirely compatible with the global capitalist system as competing producers. To make a Fisherian turn towards popular culture, such a thesis is affirmed and exemplified in Network Executive Arthur Jensen’s speech to the freshly-radicalised newscaster Howard Beale in the film *Network*.

What do you think the Russians talk about in their councils of state — Karl Marx? They get out their linear programming charts, statistical decision theories, minimax solutions, and compute the price-cost probabilities of their transactions and investments, just like we do.

Allende’s Chile was an entirely different matter from the Stalinist bloc. It was not a competing producer within the system, but ultimately refused the systemic global binary of the West-East axis entirely whilst setting its sights squarely on capitalism through democratic and experimental means. As a consequence neoliberalism, *Empire*, drew its plans against the Chilean revolution, and inflicted itself upon the region with the utmost brutality, with new experiments in social butchery carried out by Pinochet and his Chicago School advisors. It is hard not be reminded of a quote from the game *Disco Elysium* about the commune of Revachol in whose ruins the game is set:

The people of this archipelago tried to build something new, something *different*. The rest of the world didn’t like it, so they came and ended it.

Such was the inauguration of capitalist realism, in a global struggle.

Capitalist realism is one side of an active struggle, the struggle for our affect, and the struggle for our consciousness. Capitalist realism as it proliferated took a further victory in defeating and recuperating the counter-culture, the experimentations of the 1960s and 70s. But this defeat is not total, because capitalism did not win due to a historical inevitability, to the same extent that our losses in the 20th century were not themselves inevitable as in the depressive outlook of capitalist realism, both in the concept and within the book itself. Fisher rejects the narrative that he flirts with in *Capitalist Realism*—that the revolts of the 60s led to neoliberalism[15]—and instead begins a counter-attack, a counter-narrativization. He asks

What if the counterculture was only a stumbling beginning, rather than the best that could be hoped for? What if the success of neoliberalism was not an indication of the inevitability of capitalism, but a testament to the scale of the threat posed by the spectre of a society which could be free?

It is in the spirit of these questions that this book shall return to the 1960s and 1970s. The rise of capitalist realism could not have happened without the narratives that reactionary forces told about those decades. Returning to those moments will allow us to continue with the process of unpicking the narratives that neoliberalism has woven around them. More importantly, it will enable the construction of new narratives.[16]

If the past was not destined to lose, then the past experimented with can be taken up again for the sake of active contestation, for a world to win.

In the active struggle for our political consciousness against capitalist realism, Acid Communism was to be the other side of that struggle. It was to be a project of unforgetting that which made neoliberalism so scared that it forced us to forget it. Acid communism is made of three distinct and yet interrelated and inseparable modes of practice, theorization, and imagination. Acid communism is the unity of class consciousness, socialist-feminist consciousness raising, and psychedelic consciousness, a “fusion of new social movements with a communist project, an unprecedented aestheticization of everyday life.[17] For

Fisher, insofar as actual social formations are “shaped by the potential formations whose actualization they impede”, then we can detect the possibility of the communist horizon in neoliberalism’s own activity in making it impossible.[18] Maybe in this sense, Acid Communism is not a movement, something to be emblazoned upon a banner, but a practice of cultivating that which lingers in our culture which we have been forced to repress and forget. Consciousness must be raised to seeing how this active suppression functions, in its integration in the production of capitalist objectivity as well as capitalist subjectivity, and all the racisms, sexism, and heteronormativities encoded into it. Such a project is psychedelic because psychedelia concerns consciousness and its relation to the fundamental realities and structures of how we experience the world. Experiencing the world through a socialist-feminist class consciousness changes the categories of how you think, and opens up new potentialities in not only unforgetting them, but reformulating them for the present state of affairs, as Fisher remarks: “If the very fundamentals of our experience, such as our sense of space and time, can be altered, does that not mean that the categories by which we live are plastic, mutable?”[19] The rigidity of social experience which allows for no alternative denies this plasticity, yet it has to presuppose it in constantly making us into subjects under capitalist realism.

The means of the production of subjectivity are not entirely monopolized by capital, culture is recognized by Fisher as an active site of struggle at its most intense. This recognition leads him, ultimately, to a post-capitalist-realist optimism. The revolution is once again recognized as possible, because neoliberalism must constantly deny this possibility. Seize the means of the production of consciousness, and we can cultivate our post-capitalist desire, for the spectre of a world which could be free. A final quote from Fisher, with which he concludes his introduction to Acid Communism, after illustrating the demands of Berardi and other militant Italian Autonomists for an automated post-work future:

In 1977, such demands seemed not only realistic but inevitable — “*look comrades, the revolution is probable*”. Of course, we now know that the revolution did not happen. But the material conditions for such a revolution are more in place in the twenty-first century than they were in 1977. What has shifted beyond all recognition since then is the existential and emotional atmosphere. Populations are resigned to the sadness of work, even as they are told that automation is making their jobs disappear. We must regain the optimism of that Seventies moment, just as we must carefully analyse all the machineries that capital deployed to convert confidence into dejection. Understanding how this process of consciousness-deflation worked is the first step to reversing it.[20]

[1] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, (Zero Books, 2009), 2

[2] Ibid, 2.

[3] Ibid, 13.

[4] Ibid, 1.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid, 5.

[7] Ibid, 7-8.

[8] Ibid, 21

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid, 25.

[11] Ibid, 26.

[12] Ibid, “Acid Communism (Unfinished Introduction)”, in *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher (2004-2016)*, pp.753-770, 755.

[13] Ibid, 754.

[14] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, (Bloomsbury, 2018), 530.

[15] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, (Zero Books, 2009), 27.

[16] Mark Fisher, “Acid Communism (Unfinished Introduction), in *K-Punk: The Collected and Unpublished Writings of Mark Fisher (2004-2016)*, pp.753-770, 757.

[17] Ibid, 757-8.

[18] Ibid, 758.

[19] Ibid, 763.

[20] Ibid, 770.



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