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Reaction, Progression and Vaccination, or: What can Squid Game tell us about pandemics?

Abstract

This paper analyses the so-called “reactionary” and “progressive” attitudes towards vaccination during the COVID-19 pandemic and poses the question as to how a hitherto apolitical phenomenon, such as vaccination could be articulated as a manifestation and field of performance for polarized worldviews. It claims an uncertainty of belonging in the middle-class and approaches both attitudes as a symptom of that. The development of the logic of capital in circulation of commodity exchange from *equalization* to *indifferentiation* is stated as to what allows this uncertainty to render apolitical phenomena as a field of clashing worldviews. Indifference of commodities leads to the extra-economic gaining primacy over the economical and heating up the competition of self-distinguishment. Both attitudes are revealed then as varying means to win the competition, vis-à-vis the fact that none of them counts more than the other.

Keywords: Pandemic, Vaccination, Polarization, Middle-Class, Self-Distinguishment, Logic of Capital, Equivalency, Indifference

Introduction

Since the election of Donald Trump there has been an increasing tendency of articulating many previously non-political phenomena as symbols of belonging to a front of a “worldview.” The claim of such an articulation does not indicate a mere extension of the realm of the political to the previously non-political, though. There is something stranger at stake: the so-called political comes to express itself overwhelmingly through creating opinions and judgements on what we hitherto came to know as solely apolitical phenomena which could have been considered just as dry and banal facts of daily life.

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As such, one could regard human behavior in case of a contagious disease. It is supposed to belong to the realm of *common* sense¹ that you do not go to public places if you are sick, and accordingly that you get vaccinated to protect yourself and others if there is a situation of pandemic. The simplicity here lies in the fact that, framed as such, one cannot find anything “political” in this: neither any humanity-securing democratic gesture as it is expressed in the “liberal progressive” attribute, nor a personal freedom-restricting dystopian gesture as is found in the noisy reactionary attribute of conspiracy narratives on vaccination.

So, before COVID-19, it probably would have been hard to imagine that a pandemic could institute or at least nourish polarized “political identities.”

In the age of the so-called “post-truth” however, in which the experience of reality itself started to alter depending on the “worldview”, the recent pandemic not only renders the attitude towards the pandemic to a realm of clashing worldviews, consumer preferences and beliefs, but even the existence of the virus has been called into question as part of this clash.

Regarding the strangeness of the whole phenomenon, it is quite striking that until now there have predominantly been only attempts to “explain” reactionary attitudes of the “Covid-Deniers” or the possible reasons of “Anti-Vaccination” resentment. Yet, if you frame the occurrences during the pandemic in that way, the questionability of the whole phenomenon is abolished, that is to say, such a framing already entails a decision on the nature of the phenomenon and gives an answer before asking any questions. For if you only focus on explanations as to from where the “reactionary” tendency stemmed during the pandemic, you implicitly assume the position of “progressivity”, do not pose a true question, and take such a strange phenomenon that “vaccinations” could get politicized as a matter of fact. However, if it comes to the crucial question as to *how it is possible that a pandemic in general or the attitude towards vaccinations in particular can become a clash of symbols and even institute political identities*, a framing which assumes a progressivity would fail to grasp the crux of the issue. Accordingly, to be able to pursue this question, we must go beyond public opinions on the dichotomy between “progressive” and “reactionary” camps.

For that reason, instead of adding one more approach to the inflating market of analyses about the nature of the contemporary populist “reactionary” wave and taking

¹ Hannah Arendt hears in this word the emphasis on *common*. Regarding the “common” in common sense she says the following: “Even the experience of the materially and sensually given world depends upon my being in contact with other men, upon our *common* sense, which regulates and controls all other senses and without which each of us would be enclosed in their own particularity of sense data, which in themselves are unreliable and treacherous. So, only because we have common sense, that is only because not man, but men in plural inhabit the earth can we trust our immediate sensual experience” (Arendt, 1973: 475-476) So, I lean here on the Arendtian emphasis in this word.

“progressivity” for granted, this paper will dare something else. It will take different attitudes towards vaccination as a symptom and pose the question as to how an attitude towards vaccination during the pandemic could serve as a manifestation of certain worldviews and proof of a belonging either to a “reactionary” or a “progressive” front.

If we do not want to take the “fronts” for granted but rather want to analyze their condition of possibility of being, then we must search for a third term in which two opposites belong together. For this purpose, I suggest “middle-class” as a third term in which two seemingly clashing “fronts” belong together. Accordingly, I propose to frame the established opinion on the juxtaposition of two coherent fronts during the pandemic², that is, one being the progressive and left-liberal and the other being right-populist and reactionary within a crisis of the middle-class. I regard the clash of symbols exemplified through the question of vaccination as just a symptom of that crisis.

In all this, my starting claim is the following: a juxtaposition of “progressivity” against “reaction” implicitly presupposes a line which separates the two. The point is however, that a line of separation is at the same time something which unites the two separated entities in a third term, which goes beyond the juxtaposition itself. So, instead of taking the fronts by themselves, I propose a dialectical approach and claim the “logic of capital” that I will define as the logic of indifference in its late modern-capitalist development, as the condition of possibility of being for both fronts, insofar as this logic enables an antagonistic dynamic within the middle-class and carries it as a whole. To make my claim plausible, I will begin by outlining in a broader realm what I mean with crisis of the middle-class. In this first part, I will briefly discuss Andreas Reckwitz’s conception of distinction between the new and old middle-class and “singularity” as the defining characteristic of the new middle-class subjectivity. I will show that *singularizability* is a criterion according to which Reckwitz defines two distinct groups in late modernity, namely the “losers” and the “winners.”

In the second part, I will challenge this dichotomic conception with the claim that such an approach neglects the *logic of capital*, which I will determine as an equalization of the unequal and define as the underlying dynamics of the antagonism within the middle-class itself. For this purpose, I will sketch out the establishment of the logic of capital as an expanding circulation of commodity exchange and elaborate on the dialectics of the logic of capital which appear dominantly as equalization in its early period and indifferentiation in its late modern facete. I will highlight the role of the

² As “pandemic” as a whole entails a vast multiplicity of phenomena, I choose the attitude towards vaccination as a significant representant of the juxtaposition of “progressive” and “reactionary” and I will limit my analysis to this aspect.

“extra-economic” in the expansion and maintenance of commodity circulation of in our present times.

I will then move on to the third part in which I will discuss the role of the conception of “nature” as the main catalyzer of the commodity circulation expansion in late modern times, before concluding with an outline of late modern logic of capital as an “indifferentiation” of both products and individuals in their infinite plurality. Indifferentiation here is to be understood not in the sense, as if both the products and individuals would become “uniform”, but in the sense that their praised infinite “diversity” does not matter, insofar as none counts more than the other. Exactly this *indifference in diversity* prepares the extra-economic as a perfect ground to serve as a stage of infinite competition and clash for “self-distinguishment”.

The crisis of the middle-class: Who are the winners, who are the losers?

We have been witnessing a crisis of the middle-class for some decades. The middle-class is economically shrinking in the Western world³. Yet, what concerns us more than the statistical details of this shrinkage is the extra-economic impact of this economic phenomenon. Because I claim that the economic decline allows us to observe something strange: There are fewer people who belong to the middle-class in economic terms but more who pursue their lives to fulfill a life according to middle-class ideals, which consists in a fundamental belief of a bond between a refined “choice of consumption” and a successful realization of one’s own “individuality.” To be concise: as paradox as it may sound, the more the middle-class shrinks economically, the more its discursive impact on “fictitious values” holding Western societies together, expands.

This became especially visible in the recent rise of “right-populisms” in different European contexts when the only way of de-legitimizing these waves in many Western countries has showed itself to be the exclusion of the “right-populists” and reactionaries of different genres discursively from a fictitious civic middle-class, although in terms of socio-economic resources, there has been not much that could differentiate the “reactionary right-populists” from those groups of the idealized progressive liberal

³ Various empirical studies arrive at the conclusion that in various developed Western countries, the middle-class is getting squeezed: the available resources are constantly shrinking for the “middle-class”. Among others, an OECD study shows that just in Germany where the author of this paper currently lives, in 1995 70 % of the population was counted as “middle-class”, whereas in 2018 it decreased to 64 % (Consiglio, Valentina et al., 2021) In addition to already existing tendency of a shrinking middle-class, recent studies indicate that the pandemic has accelerated an already existing tendency in a massive way, so that the competition of “belonging” to middle-class is heating up and spreading to more extra-economic realms of symbols, as a symptom of the declining economic basis.

branch of the “middle-class”, which has been considered as the protector of democratic “values”.⁴ If we approach the polarization throughout the pandemic under the light of this already existing crisis, we are able to observe the continuum of a competition to regulate and dominate the fictitious values of the “civic center” of society in the attitudes towards the pandemic. The crisis and the severity of the clash seems to lie in the fact that economically seen, none of the visibly clashing fronts can clearly assume the so-called civic center and the position of *genuine* contemporary middle-class: precarity counts for both fronts.

Occidental Ease and Andreas Reckwitz's urban creative new middle-class

Vis-à-vis the fact that the middle-class is economically shrinking, a way of life in a certain welfare establishes itself as a point of aspiration for many people, albeit for very few this way of life is realized and for the majority it remains a precious aspiration, if not realizable materially at least experienceable fictitiously through certain symbols. So, if belonging cannot be maintained economically, the realization of certain symbols of belonging to the middle-class gains in significance.

Alain Badiou once coined a term in order to emphasize the fictitious attractive character of middle-class welfare in the Western world, namely “the occidental ease” (Badiou, 2016). This term sums up all the attributes of an aspired condition of life in Western societies and imaginations of life designs, like in an insurance or banking advertisement, where you can see care-free wealthy and happy people, or in an Instagram account of an “influencer”, whose life seems to combine adventure, self-realization and financial success.

Where the material conditions cannot constitute a secure belonging, the discursive, cultural, or overall, the symbolic realm, can become a scene of competition for asserting one's own belonging. Such a competition of belonging, however, should not be understood as if people would fight explicitly for belonging to the entity called “middle-class” but rather as an unintended consequence of the competition for self-distinction. So, the following applies: the one who can distinguish himself successfully *belongs* genuinely.

It is evident that one cannot abstract this success from the realm of the economic. Exactly at that point, the recent analysis of the famous German sociologist Andreas

⁴ One can think of the quite wealthy “Green Party” voters in southern Germany. They have supported various right-wing conspiratory movements, among them also “Queer Denken” (which we can compare to QAnon in the USA), and one can certainly not define these “civic” group of people as outside of the German middle-class. In that manner, the work of the sociologist Oliver Nachtwey is important: he shows, namely, that in contrast to assumptions of the lower-class character of the so-called “Querdenker”, at least in southern Germany, it is a perfectly middle-class based movement. For further details, see the study: (Frei, Nadine, & Nachtwey, Oliver 2022)

Reckwitz in his major work *The Society of Singularities* (2018) gains relevance for our purpose, as Reckwitz stresses this conjunction and suggests self-distinguishment to be the carrier of this conjunction.

According to Reckwitz, there is a transformation of the middle-class in late modern times. This transformation is to be grasped as a result of what Reckwitz calls a “structural change” in modernity. The claim is the following: whereas the norm of the old middle-class in classical modernity was “being inconspicuous”, it shifts to “self-distinguishment” in late modernity (Reckwitz, 2018: 266). Reckwitz states a descriptive transition from what he calls “social democratic-corporational consensus” in the classical modernity of the Keynesian era to an “apertistic-differential liberalism” in late modernity as the reason of that shift in the norms of middle-class (Reckwitz, 2018: 371). In Reckwitz’s account, this shift creates certain “winners” and “losers.” So, there is an insecurity of belonging today mainly amongst those, whom he calls the members of the “old-middle-class of the classical modernity”, who experience a social and economic decline and fear a complete relegation into “lower-class” (Reckwitz, 2018: 411). Reckwitz identifies this latter group as the reactionary right-populist front. So, according to his conception, the old middle-class constitutes the losers of our present times and this is Reckwitz’s explanation of their reaction: they react to their losses. In contrast to the losers, Reckwitz declares the left-liberal urban front, mostly employed in “creative jobs” as members and pioneers of the new-middle-class. Accordingly, they are the winners of late modernity (Reckwitz, 2018: 104).

This is an approach which we must put into question and distance ourselves from. Because, firstly it attributes to these “fronts” a coherency and assumes that the insecurity of belonging exists only for the so-called losers of modernity, and secondly and more importantly: Reckwitz, sympathizing implicitly with the new middle-class, remains within the parameters of the dichotomy and in an apology of existing inequalities he “explains” only, why the losers have lost.

We could certainly not suggest that they are no losers of the late modern times. However, the question is: can we really say that one of the fronts is the winner?

We can also rephrase this question in the following provocative way to challenge the dominant view of our present times, which consists in attributing reactionary tendencies solely to the lower-class and a progressive liberalism to the middle-class as it comes to expression in Reckwitz’ approach *par excellence*.⁵ So, let us ask: what if there

⁵ Reckwitz among others reproduces at least one major “public opinion” of our present times with his assumption on the clear-cut dichotomy, glorifying the “liberal” character of the new middle-class when he says that the new middle-class would vote center-left, whereas the new under-class would mostly vote for Right-Populist Parties, with motives of reaction like “Critique of Elites” and “Anti-Globalism” (Reckwitz, 2021: 359). As I have shown in the case of the “affluent Green voters” of Southern Germany, this glorification of the fictitious liberal “middle-class values” constitute part of

are no winners but only losers, as far as the fact is concerned that the economical basis of the middle-class is narrowing? And from this follows: given that it is the case, what could indicate a secure belonging to an aspirated *new*, progressive, tolerant, cosmopolitan middle-class; or to the middle-class at all?

The point is that the uncertainty itself is, in fact, what enables the hitherto non-political phenomena to become a symbol clashing field. Considering the fact that the middle-class shrinks economically, I think that it is the same uncertainty of belonging which does not appeal either to the so-called reactionary front or to the so-called progressive front in particular but rather, *this uncertainty itself has to be grasped as the condition of possibility for a formation of fronts and their fictional coherency*. Accordingly, this shared uncertainty and overall insecurity of one's own place is also the very condition of possibility for witnessing the current clash of symbols.

The attitude towards vaccination in the Covid pandemic has added only some more contrast to this clash. From its very outset, the vaccination has not been grasped as a banal medical question to enable the ending of the pandemic, but rather as something way beyond that. So, it became rather a question of "personal freedom" and the attitude towards it, an indicator of a worldview and a political identity, a place of belonging.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, social media have been an unquestionable field of performing one's own belonging. There, we can observe the following two attitudes, which differ in content but are identical in their form, insofar as both attribute a symbolical surplus value to the vaccination, thereby rendering the question of vaccination into something beyond a banal and necessary tool in fighting the pandemic but, instead, rather as a tool of one's own self-distinguishment.

With a bit more contrast added, what we observe in social media could be described as follows: if you are vaccinated, you can add a picture to your social media profile (such as a sexy profile or a holiday picture with a "I had my COVID-19 jab" logo) and enjoy yourself with a surplus fantasy of being on the progressive life-saving side of humanity, reason, and science and distinguish yourself from the uneducated reactionary rabble. If you refuse the vaccine, you can also put it on your social media profile (again with a sexy profile or a holiday picture, this time with a logo: "End the COVID Dictatorship!") and enjoy the fantasy of a pseudo-rebellion; being of a very rare breed that takes the heavy burden of a mission to awaken the obedient rest of humanity.

What we must detect here is a point, which unites both fronts, that is, the aspiration for self-distinguishment as the only way to enjoy one's own self, both as a promise and

the myth and must be challenged in order to find a genuine emancipatory orientation out of the crisis in which we find ourselves in present times.

commandment of late modern capitalism, which constitutes a common ground and a determinacy of belonging to the middle-class today. If there is a fundamental point of success in Andreas Reckwitz's analysis, it lies indeed in his capability to catch this point which finds in the title of his work "The Society of *Singularities*" a concise expression: the determinant of belonging to the new middle-class is today the question of successful self-distinguishment: insofar as you realize the promise and commandment of being unique and yourself, you can consider yourself as an individual. In this manner, Reckwitz is right about coining today's society as the society of *singularities*.

Just like commodities, in Reckwitz's conception singularities are bound to markets as well, namely to "cultural markets of singularization" in which subjects, objects, locations and events compete (Reckwitz, 2018: 108). The winner character of the new urban middle-class lies then in the fact that it dominates this market by combining the romantic ideal of authenticity with economic success (Reckwitz, 2018: 109). So, the concept of "successful self-distinguishment" in that frame reveals itself as a paradox combination of an authenticity compatible with given "economic and technological structures". In other words, singularization is only successful if it can be included into the circulation of commodity exchange and create a surplus value.

However, as I have shown above, Reckwitz's conception of singularity is a conjunction and not to be derived solely by the economical. Accordingly, he identifies singularity as a performative term. So, just as in the common advertisement slogans such as "make an impact!", to singularize means distinguishing oneself through making an impact. An impact is yet only palpable in its expression; in the effect, that is to say, an impact can only be realized in its externalization, in the outcome. Whether the impact that one makes will show any effect in the economic realm is, at that stage, contingent. However, certain is the fact that it has to be shown, performed and of course: seen by others. So, it is thus not a coincidence that I mentioned social media profiles as social media is the vastest realm, a stage, in which the aspiration of self-distinguishment can show an impact through a palpable effect.

Having said that, we are now ready to move to a fundamental aspect of self-distinguishment, which will carry our analysis to the logic of capital.

There is an implicit belief uniting both fronts under the subjugation to the main promise of late modern capitalism, which is that you can only distinguish yourself in your choice of consumption. The crisis of the middle-class is crystallized exactly at this point, because the more the realm of circulation expands, the harder self-distinguishment becomes, and this is the reason, why the extra-economic enters in late modern times as an indispensable supplement and catalyzer to the choice of consumption.

This is a crucial point, which Andreas Reckwitz's approach of singularity fails to consider. Since his approach is biased by a normative assumption about the character of the new urban creative middle-class as being liberal, diverse, tolerant and cosmo-

politian, he limits the ability of singularizability only to this special breed and fixes the scope of singularity to foster diversity, tolerance, and overall, an idealized liberal attitude. What this approach fails to grasp is the fact that self-distinguishment is the overall commandment of late modern capitalism, uniting what today constitutes the middle-class under a “type” of subjectivity, indifferent to any progress or reaction. The distinguishing characteristic of this uniting “type” is the challenge to prove the maxim, that is: *I am me*.⁶

So, if we regard self-distinguishment as an end for the late modern individual but a means for maintaining the circulation of exchange today, it becomes arbitrary to limit “successful self-distinguishment” with a pluralist liberal attitude of the so-called new middle-class. Albeit constituting today’s ideal of middle-class subjectivity, the pluralist, tolerant, cosmopolitan, and liberal way is only *one* particular means to achieve the end of self-distinguishment among many others. As far as the fact is concerned that everything can be rendered into an object and means of self-distinguishment, a coherency in the progressivity of means cannot be found. In fact, the cultus of the late modern maxim *I am me* as a whole, lies in a fundamental regress, namely a sublimation of a strange infantile narcissism (Freud, 1972) as a popular, intellectual anthropological goal which renders everything solely to a source and object of salvation for *me* to be *myself*. The liberal and illiberal, progressive and reactionary attitudes are based both on this fundamental regress.

From equivalence to indifference or from early to late capitalism: Expansion of circulation

If we cannot fix self-distinguishment to a normative ideal of liberal middle-class subjectivity and claim that illiberal or reactionary subjectivities also belong to the same logic, how can we get closer to the nature of a common economic ground that we have claimed?

⁶ Martin Heidegger has a very interesting point on the character of this “type”: he thinks that Nietzsche’s conception of *Übermensch* determines for the first time the “human subject” not just as a particular type but as “the” type (Heidegger, 1997: 128). Heidegger anticipates in Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* the depiction of today’s “everyman”. Because for Heidegger, this “type” designates a “between”, namely between “individual” and “mass.” Therein, he sees an aspiration of creation of a manhood, which finds its expression neither in the “individual” nor in the “mass”. The “type” is then to be grasped as a reconciliation and union of two opposite qualities, which gains a striking significance in the transition from early to late modernity, namely being general and common and at the same time unique. In other words, what Heidegger sees in Nietzsche’s conception of *Übermensch*, which he names the “type”, is something in-advancing that today, in the common reality of our late modern actuality enables everyone to believe in his “uniqueness.”

I recommend searching the answer in the logic of capital which can be regarded as a logic of counting-as-one, or more precisely: the transformation of the dynamics in terms of expansion of commodity circulation from early to *late capitalism*⁷.

The maxim of self-distinguishment constitutes a *supplement* to the primordial logic of capital as Marx conceived it, if not challenging his conception fundamentally. So, the point is not, that this logic has been exposed to a radical change in our present times, but rather the primordial unity of its simultaneous outcomes, in terms of its equalizing and indifferenciating effects, which have already been sharply depicted by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifest*, first become more clearly observable and palpable in the development and establishment of capitalism. So, in this part, I will elaborate on the dialectics of equivalence and indifference.

According to Marx, the distinguishing character of capitalist production is not that it is based on commodity production, that is, production of goods for the purpose of selling, but that commodity production is the *general* mode of production (Marx, 1990: 35). So, where does the distinguishing character lie then?

Well, Marx's point is that pre-modern/pre-capitalistic commodity production has been based on the exchange of surplus of what people have produced for their own subsistence. The commodity part was just the rest (Marx, 1990: 293). Yet, in capitalistic production, it is produced only to sell. That means, the exchange value of commodity gains an absolute priority over the use value under capitalism. This is indeed a point, where Marx attributes a civilizing character to capitalism. Yet, why "civilizing"?

⁷ The term "late capitalism" mostly became popular in the circles affiliated with "Frankfurt School" (Adorno, 1969), (Bloch, 1977) but has been spread widely after Ernest Mandel's work "Late Capitalism." For Mandel, the scope of the meaning of this term entails widespread development and establishment of the characteristics and tendencies of capitalism – theorized by Marx - in the 20th century, such as a total commodification of all aspects of human life, complete fluidization of capital as "finance capital" and an industrialization of all aspects of production (Mandel, 1976). In that manner Frederic Jameson follows Mandel and even calls "postmodernism" another name for the "cultural logic of late capitalism" (Jameson, 1997). Although various authors emphasize that this concept has become a "catch-all term" throughout the years (Kotsko, 2018), (Crary, 2013), I firmly believe that this term is still favorable, as it emphasizes a continuum in the establishment of capitalism. This continuum in and through differences enables a dialectical approach, allowing us to grasp our present times in a de-mystifying way. So, "late" capitalism surely claims shifts in capitalism, however it traces these shifts back to a logic of capital, which may become far more "complex" but still intact in today's situation. This is a reason why I prefer this term over other popular terms, especially over "neoliberalism" that I avoid using in my analysis. Because, although there are important exceptions, such as Harvey's approach (Harvey, 2005) the widespread use and popularization of this term creates a tacit tendency to abstract liberalism from capitalism, through shifting the blame solely onto "neo" liberalism which is grasped as an "economic" liberalism and regarded as a metamorphosis and deviation from political liberalism. Such a liberalism securing apologetic attitude comes paradigmatically to the fore e.g., in approaches like Wendy Brown's (see: Brown, 2019).

In order to give a proper answer to that question, which will reveal itself as crucial, let us make a detour:

Marx warns us in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* to not fall prey to the fallacy of searching the equalizing impact of capitalistic production in the realm of circulation, that is, in money as medium of exchange (Marx, 2015: 52). He says that it is not money which renders commodities commensurable, hence money expresses only the commensurability which is already contained in the commodity form itself. This means that the source of equivalency is to be searched elsewhere. The priority of exchange value renders circulating goods into *equivalent* commodities. This, however, is to be grasped only as an effect of something deeper, that is, a shift in the conception of human labor from *quality* to *quantity* (Marx, 2013: 94), which we can grasp as the impact of capitalist commodity production which counts the labor of each different individual as-one, that is to say: equivalent. This is in fact what enables erroneously different qualities of goods to circulate as equivalent commodities through the medium of money.

For Marx, the conception of human labor as a mere quantity has crucial outcomes, insofar as Marx - as Hegel's student - conceives the shift from *quality* to *quantity* as an abstract equalization and indifferentiation of quality.⁸ According to Marx the very conception of modern equality is indeed based on a conception of human labor as equivalency (Marx, 2013: 74; 2015: 171). This results in a contradictory outcome: the conception of labor as quantity, that is, equivalent quality, reduces man, on the one hand, to a "laboring animal", depriving him of all his other qualities, but on the other hand this shift in the conception of labor shows, at least in one point, a progressive, civilizing effect. It enables the commodification to be *general* rather than being a mere *particularity*, as it has been in the pre-modern, pre-capitalistic phases. The equalizing effect of general commodity exchange melts down all the previous hierarchies, not only among the circulating goods but also among the skills of men producing them and accordingly: among men themselves (Marx, 1990: 464). It means that the equivalence of the labor which is expressed in general commodity exchange dissolves the medieval social hierarchies, insofar as with capitalism the equivalent human labor

⁸ In *Kapital* Marx leans on the Hegelian conception of "quantity" which Hegel grasps as indifferent quality. It is worth to note a double meaning in Hegel's definition of transition from "quality" to "quantity" in *Logic*, which comes to the fore in the adjective "gleichgültig". The German adjective that Hegel uses to define the transition of quality into quantity, namely *gleich-gültig* has a double meaning: it means on the one hand "equivalent" but on the other hand "indifferent". So, in Hegel's terms, a quantity is a unified, *equalized* quality, yet as far as quality is equalized, it has no differentiating characteristic anymore, thus "indifferent". Only keeping this double meaning in mind, can allow us to grasp the quantity in Hegelian terms properly as "indifferent" quality (see: Hegel, 1986: 199-209).

builds the basis of legal counting-as-one, which later finds its expression in “equality of citizens before the law.”

So, commodification is in a sense the very condition of possibility of equivalization of individuals, which is quite essential for the later development of modern democratic societies.

There is a dialectical trade-off to introduce here between “progression and re-action” which gains prominence, especially in late capitalism. The establishment of commodity production throughout modernity brings with it a growing expansion of equivalency, that is, the expanding inclusion of everything into circulation of commodity exchange which previously might have been incommensurable. We can regard this expansion of “inclusion to circulation” as a retreat and vanishing of transcendence: the more the circulation expands, the more the sacred, divine, unique and incommensurable vanishes. We can conceive that as a *flattening* tendency⁹. In terms of this flattening effect of circulation of commodities, Marx remarks that “everything what *is*, insofar it can be bought or sold, is equivalent, that is: it has an equal validity and value” (Marx, 2015: 728). According to Marx, the same applies to subjects who engage in a relation of exchange. On this, Marx has an even more drastic point. He says that “a worker, for example, who buys a commodity for 3 shillings, appears to the seller in the equivalent function, just as the king who does the same” (Marx, 2015: 160). There is an apparent emancipatory and progressive effect of commodification and the expansion of equivalency.

Yet, there is also a “price” of expanding equivalency, which shows itself in transforming the quality of anything which enters circulation as indifferent. This is also the point where the civilizing role, that Marx attributed to capitalism, shifts into its opposite and we, as the contemporaries of late modern capitalism, witness and endure the effects of this shift drastically.

Indeed, the direction of development from early to late modernity has paled the emancipatory role of equivalency and established the logic of capital more and more as the logic of indifference. This logic of indifference however, in contrary to common assumptions of a retreat of individuality or uniqueness, should not be grasped as a uniforming effect of mass-consumption, in the sense of a mere “sameness” but rather as something more paradox, that is: indifferentiation as a result of infinite diversification of choice of consumption.

That is to say: the seal of difference-lessness today does not lie in a North Korean-style forced uniformity but rather in the stiffened belief of unique individuality in

⁹ It is to be noted that with very different terms and motives and without any reference to capitalism Nietzsche comes to a similar diagnosis of a “flattening” tendency in modernity, which he sees as the ultimate goal of democratic and socialist movements of his times (see: Nietzsche, 1980).

infinite diversity of the choice of consumption. There is one major uniting component, though, for the whole middle-class, playing a catalyzing role in the further establishment of the logic of capital, that is the conception of nature. Even in an infinite diversity, “natural” constitutes a point of attraction for each and every one and an indispensable part of diverse offers of life-designs. So, in the next part, I will analyze the image of nature, its impact on the expansion of circulation of commodity exchange before showing how this conception blurs the picture of two coherent fronts in the debate over vaccination.

The conception of “nature” as a catalyzer of commodification

In the previous part, I have manifested a fundamental component in the expansion of commodification throughout modernity, which is the constant inclusion of the hitherto incommensurable into circulation and rendering it into something commensurable. The modern conception of nature plays a catalyzing role in that expansion, and it is the effect of this role which might allow us to shed a different light on the clear-cut juxtaposition of a “reactionary” or “progressive” position towards the question of vaccination during the pandemic.

There is a passage in *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, which is quite relevant for understanding the character of the concept of “nature” in modernity. Here, Adorno claims that “enlightened” man’s denial of his inner nature was the condition to gain control over an external “nature” (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1981: 72-73).

In terms of the modern conception of nature, Heidegger adds one more dimension: He suggests that what modern men call “nature” describes only beings which are “captured in the planning anticipation and placed in the chains of human calculation” (Heidegger, 1989: 133). This is to say that according to Heidegger as well as for Adorno, “nature” is a humanized concept even though it designates a point of *beyond*, namely beyond civilization. This *beyond* is in fact just a product of civilized men; the flipside of civilization itself.

With the emergence of modernity, “nature” becomes a surface of projection, which conceals an unconscious grieving of cutting off an “inner nature” in man himself, related to what Freud calls the “discontent in the civilization” (Freud, 1972). We can perhaps, insofar as it is a projection, talk of an invention of that outer nature, in which civilized men projected the fantasy of purity and a lost wholeness. The point here is that the *externalization* of nature precedes every possible later reification and commodification of it and must be read with Adorno as the dialectical antipode of a denial of any nature within oneself.

From Rousseau to Milka’s cows in the Swiss Alps: Nature as a source of allure

I suggest that capitalist consumption is conditioned by a total commodification of a Rousseauian-romantic imagination of nature and the allure of this promise does not appeal only to the so-called “reactionary” front but more or less to everyone. Thus, it is worth to turn back briefly to Rousseau here.

In certain moments of Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality*, we can find the clearest symptoms of the invention of modern nature as surface of projection. Rousseau firmly believes that it is socialization which made men weak and sick. He praises a fictional “man of nature” who never becomes ill and simply dies by getting old¹⁰ (Rousseau, 1992). Since medicine or overall human health measures are what make people weak and sick, Rousseau pleads for fleeing cities, escaping to nature and living there permanently healthy and strong (Rousseau, 1992: 23).

Although there are 250 years between Rousseau’s imagined nature and the late capitalist advertisements of Milka’s healthy cows in the Swiss Alps, or the image of Captain Iglo fishing healthy and fresh fish from the seas for our kitchens, the core of the fantasy remains intact, namely nature as a source of “health.” Nevertheless, there is at least one major difference between Rousseau’s early nature romanticism and the conception of nature in the established logic of capital in our present times: Rousseau pleads at least for *escaping* -even though fictitiously- into an external nature, that means, he pleads for a *praxis* of engagement with an *externality*, whereas late modern capitalism promises us the same fiction of external nature in reconciliation with a complete re-internalization; so in a way a promise of “experiencing” the external internally through our choices of consumption. In other words, in its late capitalist version the promise is to deliver the wildest, purest nature at your door without bothering you, as the nature is *in* the product that you buy, of which you can make a “lived-experience¹¹”. In this manner, the external becomes a part of yourself.

Way before Mark Zuckerberg’s project of “metaverse”, a very striking depiction of this internalization of the external as a way of commodification can be observed as an idea in the science fiction movie *The Total Recall* (1990) starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. In the film there are advertisements of extraterrestrial “trips” combining adventure and heroism. The point is that you do not really have to be anywhere else than on a couch: you can buy the memory and the lived-experience of the most adventurous trips to wilderness or to other planets of your choice, without putting yourself in dan-

¹⁰ It is an irony to note that almost 200 years later Georges Canguilhem defined being healthy as being able to recover again, rather than never getting sick: for Canguilhem “being never sick” must be grasped as the most severe sickness and the clearest sign of lack of health (Canguilhem, 1991).

¹¹ “Lived-experience” here refers to Heidegger’s term “Erlebnis” (Heidegger, 1994). There is no direct translation of this word, but it can be designated as an inner experience or, to put it more accurately, an exponentiated experience, that is, the experience of myself in experiencing anything external and rendering it being for its own enjoyment.

ger of being anywhere else than on your couch. Well, this corresponds exactly to what I mean with the reinternalization of a primordial externalization of nature which we can call, in Hegelian terms, a sublated [aufgehoben] internalization of nature. This is what boosts the circulation of commodity exchange in our present times in an immense way.

If we come to Rousseau's glorification, his imagination of purified nature must be thought of here just as an antipode to his urban life. So, his *nature* is just the flipside of his urban reality and daily praxis in Parisian salons and nothing beyond; just like the aspiration for the *always-more-natural* in late capitalism which demands refined *but* rawer and wilder; primordial, and pre-modern *but* chic forms of living and ways of consumption. Considering the fact that the demand for a more-natural-life reaches almost a peak for the urban creative new middle-class, we can grasp this demand of "rawer" nature just like in Rousseau's projection as the flipside of the daily praxis and reality of *urban* wealthy branch of middle-class. This aspiration takes on such a shape that certain people seem ready to recede to a brutality of middle-age praxis just for the sake of the lived-experience of a projected "nature" that they want to reach in its purity.

If we think of the positionings towards vaccination during the pandemic, the clear-cut juxtaposition of fronts must at the latest in that moment become questionable, insofar as we must see that "both fronts" aspire to the same nature, albeit "differently." Because, the whole late capitalist commodity circulation is indeed based on the catalyzing effect of a promise, namely finding *a bit of nature* in almost every product that one buys.

We can surely trace back at least one fraction of the current anti-vaccination movement glorifying natural immunity of men, believing that the artificial chemicals weaken natural immunity, directly to Rousseauian imagination of nature and his depiction of medicine as "evil", sickening man and making him weak. This must, however, not serve as source of "explanation" for the reactionary tendency, because the pro-vaccination front may be no less under the condition of the same imagination.

So, we have to see at this moment that not only one certain fraction, but late capitalism overall is under the condition of the catalyzing role of the human imagination of nature in the expansion of commodification. If we just come back to our vaccination example:

Late capitalist consumption is conditioned by a Rousseauian-romantic imagination of nature as an antipode to "unhealthy" urban civilization. Thus, the implicit promise of each commodity in late capitalism entails a proximity to this "nature as a lost heaven". And the allure of this promise appeals not only to the so-called "reactionary" front but more or less to everyone. Consider the following deliberation:

the fact that I am vaccinated may help on the one hand to distinguish myself as a progressive individual living according to scientific facts from the “other front”, yet it does not necessarily abstain me from buying a “super food” cure as a source of detox, using only cosmetics with aloe-vera, without aluminum and taking homeopathic medicine instead of “chemicals” to live as naturally as possible. Also, it does not necessarily deter my liberal news channel, which warns me of widening misinformation on superstitious beliefs about the absence of the COVID-19 virus and myths on natural immunity, from showing me advertisements intended to sell immunity boosters, natural virus killers and a bunch of other commodity varieties of “grandma’s medicine” before the evening news begin.

What is at stake here is a strange simultaneity which does not recognize any coherency. The question is again: what is the condition of possibility of this conspicuous simultaneity of contradictory phenomena?

To come back to our starting claim: the answer lies in the logic of capital; a logic that does not differentiate between the quality of circulating commodities, except in ensuring their equivalency with each other and, thus, preventing them from distorting the circulation to optimize the accumulation.

Squid Game and the logic of equivalency as logic of “indifference”

There is a dramatic as well as a simple depiction of the logic of indifference in the recent popular series *Squid Game*. Let us focus in this concluding part on two different moments in the series.

The first is the appearance of the pictures of all players in the front man’s control room: the players are presented just as different numbers in equal square frames. So, in a way, we can say that these numbers designate that all players count-as-one, which constitutes the most important rule of the game, that is, the maintenance of their alleged equality.

This equality, however, is in fact just an equivalency of their being-as-a-number, that is, their counting-as-one, which simply conceals the actual indifference of the game to existing inequalities among the players. The game does not differentiate between the players’ qualities, so the fact that some are stronger, some are smarter, as well as the differences between men and women, elderly and young, etc. do not matter. The game maintains only one basic principle, that is, all players remain equivalent and count-as-one. That is why the only point of intervention in the game occurs, not when some players try to take advantage of their superior qualities, that is to say, when the “inequalities” are manifested, but only when one of the players tries to go beyond the principal of equivalency through getting internal information and support from the guardians who take part in the organization of the games. This is the only moment in

which a player is disqualified and “eliminated.” Although a weak moral dimension of restoring justice is shown in the series as a pretext, we have to acknowledge that the player is not killed because of injustice in terms of privileges stemming from his own personal qualities, but a systemic danger which could destroy the structure of “counting.” For the game is grounded on a competition on the basis of strict equivalency of counting each player as “one.” This strict equivalency is in fact what allows and even fuels the competition. Without this strict equivalency the whole esprit of the game would be lost. The esprit lies in the fact that the players can genuinely distinguish themselves from others if they are equivalent and if they all count-as-one and that means: if the system is indifferent towards their different qualities.

Squid Game contains a double allegory: if we regard the rules of *Squid Game* in terms of the late modern capitalist actuality, we could regard both the players as symbols of equivalent commodities and commodities as the representation of equivalent individuals in competition in the late capitalist human condition. In both cases, the following applies: the infinite varying qualities of both commodities and individuals may be unequal, contradictory, antagonistic, or even conspicuously based on lies. The basic rule is that none of the commodities or individuals must dominate the field, claim an absolute supremacy, and prevent the free circulation of other commodities or competition of the individuals.

This is the point, where we see a shift from an overwhelmingly equalizing effect of the logic of capital in the early phases to an overwhelming effect of indifferentiation of the diverse and unequal in our late capitalist actuality, which necessitates more sophisticated tools to maintain the circulation of exchange: whereas for the circulation of commodity exchange early capitalism did not need any major extra economical realm, late capitalism depends mainly on the extra-economic. What circulates today with the exchange value of commodities are offers of various packages of life designs, advertised as being either the most authentic, or the most meaningful, or even the only true way of existence.¹² To come back to the striking advertisement slogan, what unites them though is that they all promise to “create an impact.” All the offers of “world-views” as well, as long as they accept to stay within the equivalent circulation, are free to circulate and compete. The extra-economic dimension in the logic of capital is needed today because the diverse qualities of commodities themselves are not enough to fuel and maintain the circulation of exchange and distinguish one in the competition of “making an impact” anymore. Thus, all commodities have to be articulated with a *surplus*. This is the reason, why the extra-economical reaches a degree of autonomy today,

¹² Jonathan Crary indicates something similar, when he says that in late capitalism “the products are hardly just devices of physical apparatuses, but various services and interconnections that quickly become the dominant or exclusive templates of one’s social reality” (Crary, 2013).

in such a way that the “worldviews” and opinions enter as equivalent supplements, articulated with a certain choice of consumption. At the same time, this is what allows one to invest in the enjoyment of self-distinguishment and a fantasy of belonging to any imagination, without necessarily having to attain the economic means for it. We can thus describe the promise of this articulation as a *lived-experience and self-enjoyment for everyone like celebrities, without necessarily having to have their resources.*

Conclusion

The condition of possibility for the clashing of symbols to exist is the logic of indifference that I tried to carve out throughout the paper. The rules of the late capitalist world do not discern any truth, any lie, any sacred or any abstract value. There is only one basic automatized blind rule operating, which is the maintenance of exchange circulation. In this manner, the narratives of a “pharma lobby” or “Illuminati” trying to control the world but also the efforts of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle to end the pandemic and “world hunger” through charity activity belong both to the same order of equivalent aspiration for the maxim of “making an impact!” That is to say: none of them counts more than any other.

The biggest irony regarding the two fronts seems to be the bitter fact that the most notorious clash takes place among individuals, who do not really possess the resources of the shrinking middle-class: neither the vaccinated freelancer nor the unemployed conspiracist can really enjoy the promised “occidental ease.” So, if there is a winner in this clash, it seems to be the fantasy of “occidental ease” which is a fiction masking the reality of countless people and leading them in a hope of “singularization” under the cultus of “I am me” to invest for their “big time” which one day should come. This fantasy maintains -just to say it with Hegel- the “bad infinity” of the given order of things and contributes to the manner of sustainment of commodity exchange circulation in our present times.

The pandemics sharpens the emergency of two vivid facts, which have already been on the agenda: the first is that democracy crisis deepens and this crisis challenges and accelerates the erosion of the 150-year-old articulation between democracy and capitalism, insofar as capitalism in its established logic of indifference shows an ability to adapt with the decline of the democratic state institutions to form a kind of sublated corporational feudalism. Secondly and more importantly, as Alain Badiou indicates quite concisely in his recent series of seminars *Comment vivre et penser en un temps d'absolue disorientation?* (Badiou, 2022) it is a time in which we are lacking any emancipatory orientation. The only clear conclusion to derive from our analysis is that the so-called “liberal-progressive” front does not entail any emancipatory potential, as I have shown that it is only a flipside of the “reactionary” front.

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Reakcija, progresija i cijepljenje, ili: Što nam Igra lignje (Squid Game) može reći o pandemijama?

Sažetak

Ovaj rad analizira tzv. „reakcionarne” i „progresivne” stavove prema cijepljenju tijekom pandemije COVID-19 i postavlja pitanje kako bi se dosadašnji apolitični fenomen, poput cijepljenja, mogao artikulirati kao manifestacija i mjesto izvedbe polariziranih svjetonazora. Ukazuje na nesigurnu pripadnost srednjoj klasi i na pristupe obama stavovima kao simptomu toga. Navodi razvoj logike kapitala u optičaju robne razmjene od *ekvivalencije* do *indiferencijacije*, što dopušta toj nesigurnosti da apolitične pojave postanu polje sukobljenih svjetonazora. Ravnodušnost proizvođača dovodi do toga da izvanprivredna ekonomija dobiva primat nad privrednom te podgrijava konkurenciju samoprepoznatljivosti. Oba stava otkrivaju se kao različita sredstva pobjede na natjecanju, s obzirom na činjenicu da nijedan od njih nije vrijedniji od onog drugog.

Ključne riječi: pandemija, cijepljenje, polarizacija, srednja klasa, samoprepoznatljivost, logika kapitala, jednakost, ravnodušnost