

99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value: A Postcapitalist Manifesto – Book Review



99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value: A Postcapitalist Manifesto. Brian Massumi. University of Minnesota Press. 2018.

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Weighing in at just 135 pages, Brian Massumi's manifesto, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value: A Postcapitalist Manifesto*, is a slender volume. This is no 'little book of postcapitalism', however; to measure its value merely quantitatively via its length would not only ignore Massumi's core arguments, but would also severely underestimate the power of what those pages contain. This is an intricate economic, cultural and philosophical work that retrieves the concept of value from capitalist power by understanding the economic logic of the market, uncoupling value from quantification and challenging the idea that money is the best measure of value.

The 99 theses of the title are presented in separate sections, many with lemmata (subsidiary propositions) and scholia (explanatory comments) to elaborate on complex ideas. The marking off of each thesis requires that the reader take her time with each one, applying the often densely theoretical material to examples within her own frame of reference.

For instance, Thesis 53 (T53) asserts that 'the capitalist process is a more-than-human subjectivity'. Sets of lemmata and scholia break this down and examine its layered implications, exploring what the 'individual human-capital subject' really is within capitalism, and the way in which concepts such as 'discipline' and 'morality' help create the fiction that capitalism's subjectivity-without-a-subject accounts for discrete human entities.



The media images that came to mind when reading T53 were of the collapse of the Lehman Brothers bank in 2008. Bemused bank employees awkwardly left their place of work with their belongings hurriedly thrown into cardboard boxes. It seemed at the time that the capitalist process was an enormous game of snakes and ladders, and these human-capital subjects had been pushed down one of the snake chutes and hurtled out of the glass revolving doors. This apparently seismic event for the capitalist system was pretty much impossible to understand at human scale, and as I watched the news in 2008, I sensed that the editors of visual news media were trying to make me feel something for the individuals involved in lieu of that understanding; T53 explores the gap between such feeling and understanding. But those individuals about whom I was supposed to feel something also seemed entirely detached from the financial crisis, because capitalism functions through '*subjectivity-without-a-subject*'. Capitalism is '*transsubjective* and '*transindividual*', so no 2008 witness of the crash could hope to grasp its workings via these sympathetic box-carrying 'fractal regions' of the process.

One motivation, perhaps, for the presentation of the ideas in chunks is Massumi's own suspicion about the dangers of narrative – namely its tendency towards aspirational neoliberal thinking, the framing of life and value that keeps us caught in the capitalist process. For Massumi, the postcapitalist future has no place for the personal, pseudo-sovereign subject. Personalisation is part of the constitution of this soon-to-be extinct subject (Massumi suggests instead the prioritisation of *personification*, the 'expression of nonhuman forces'). Narrative can be used, says Massumi, to produce 'well-channeled human capital'. As a visible break away from the reproduction of capitalist modes of thought and being, a fragmented but interrelated set of theses is an intriguing strategy – not that I personally would wish to forego the narrative form in the non-violent struggle for postcapitalist existence. Post-scarcity ontologies might be expressed via narrative as long as its politics, historical misuses and development in English alongside industrial capitalism are understood.

In addition to what I am suggesting are Massumi's political motivations for the book's form, it has the effect of bringing to mind other deliberately fragmented texts, such as Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Finally and pragmatically, on its form, this way of presenting the text makes online reading easier, and the work is freely available in [draft form online](#) at the SenseLab-hosted [3 Ecologies Process Seed Bank](#). The Seed Bank initiative – named from [Félix Guattari's](#) 2014 book *The Three Ecologies* (which argued that the ecological crises threatening our planet are the direct result of the expansion of a new form of capitalism) – is a 'smart contracts' model for collective projects of various kinds, powering an 'alter-university' operating 'at the intersection of art, philosophy and activism'. In T95, Massumi makes clear that the book emerges from the 'collective making-thinking process' he has enjoyed as part of the 3E project.

Massumi cites many of his own recent works from 2014 onwards, opening out each argument to longer elaborations: [Politics of Affect](#) (2015) and [The Principle of Unrest](#) (2017) to name just two. It is thus no novelty amongst writers like Massumi – as well as Gilles Deleuze, Guattari and Michel Foucault – to assert that '*the subject is an effect of power*' (T53; scholium E), but Massumi draws in his self-citations to argue that 'power moves beyond biopower', with which neoliberalism is 'integrally bound up', to '*ontopower*', and that '*counter-ontopowers*' (T54) are now needed. The case Massumi makes in this section is that there are always possible resistances to figures like Donald Trump and Silvio Berlusconi who have been enabled by the endemic corruption fostered by neoliberalism, even if that very system works to make resistance impossible or unimaginable (T56).

The arguments here are relevant and urgent, taking apart the proto-fascism of the 'alt-right' that has 'unpredictable powers of contagion', for instance, or its imposition of dominant masculinity onto the head of state, one that 'annexes notions of ethnicity to the model of masculinity', resulting in the masculinist supremacism combining fierce misogyny and intense racism reported on and critiqued daily in the pages of the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* and reproduced in right-wing media (T66). Massumi suggests that the colloquial use of Trump's name as a common noun – the Donald – shows how he embodies a 'hypercapitalist overcoming of the person'. Indeed, something more than the traditional theories about charismatic leadership are required to account for 'bumbling, orange-tinged, militantly ignorant, gaffe-happy' Trump's rise to power (T71). We might take note of these theories in Britain to account for Boris Johnson's constantly immanent power grab.

There are hopeful, yet practical, t-shirt-worthy slogans scattered throughout the theses: ‘don’t bemoan complicity – game it’ (T60); given that the capitalist process is as much about producing subjectivity as producing goods, ‘this is a power that can be turned against it’ (T69); ‘there is no position of purity from which to oppose capitalism’ (T76). In sum, while Massumi is clear about the conditions required to move towards a postcapitalist future, this is not a manifesto that rails or preaches. It competently draws together economic, cultural political and philosophical theory to dissect the processes by which we are currently shaped, and how we might collectively outmanoeuvre them.



Notes:

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