

(2022 August 13) Timothy Erik Ström, Capital and Cybernetics (NLR)

Western civilization has always had trouble with the notion of zero --

- from long before Aristotle (whose dicta were later paraphrased into our aphorism "Nature abhors a vacuum");
- through the material universes of Democritus and Epicurus, jam-packed with atoms;
- to the ethereal cosmologies of pre-quantum physics;
- to the noise- and light-jammed personal space of contemporary urbanity and the high-financed resistance of polluting industries to thoroughly clean-up after themselves.

Similarly, we seem to have always had trouble getting our heads around the notion of infinity --

- from the Ionian and pre-Ionian inconceivability of nothingness and wary speculations about limitless voids;
- to the corralling of chaos with orderly cosmos; to Pythagorean insistence on sensible geometric rational-number mathematics;
- to the curtailing of unknown space with familiar constellations, figures, concepts and abstractions by theologians like Plato (when logic fails, go for myth) and imaginative and/or schizophrenic idealists since.

These days, we're faced not only with ramifications of the zero-based accounting borrowed from the Arabs (along with spices and the tablefork) in the Crusades --

- the bottom-line mind-set, in-the-red calculations, negative numbers, and zero-sum thinking that for better and worse has followed on from double- and triple-column ledgerdermain (sic);
- and an astronomy of boundless, fathomless, at best only theoretically or temporally limited outer space (and similarly expansive inner space or unconscious);
- as well as a new-age physics that goes well beyond disappearing Euclidean pointillisms and mind-boggling angels-on-the-head-of-a-pin koans that not only challenge our commonsense reliance on visual and proprioceptive reality, but present us with weirdnesses like anti-matter, time-space dissolving conundra like quantum entanglement, and time that runs in several directions at once;
- and in the last century or so for the first time in history having to come to grips with truly global phenomena like world wars, nuclear Armageddon, post-nationalist neoliberal economics, nano-plastics and a smorgasbord of forever chemicals in everything from the poles to our

chromosomes, pandemics, climate disruption, and a wide range of certifiable viral insanities.

In the long historical analysis linked here, Timothy Erik Ström takes a hard (left) look at one important thread in the present imbroglio, the cultural compression and socio-political oppression of a world in the grip of digital cybertech controlled by individual billionaires and monomaniacal megacorporations.

"Any theorization of communications will need to foreground the concept of abstraction—in the sense, not of a concrete-abstract dichotomy, but as a material social practice with deep historical roots. . . .

Running with Bacon's aphorism, *scientia potesta est*—knowledge is power—his successors studied nature in order to extract secrets that could lead to prediction and control, to establish the 'Empire of Man' over creation. This drive to dominate was central to what the American urbanist Lewis Mumford called capitalism's 'quest for power by means of abstractions'. . . . Abstraction became problematic, as it facilitated dominion over nature, including human nature, and over other peoples.

The idea of abstraction is crucial to the concept of cybernetic capitalism. . . .

The origins of cybernetic capitalism, then, lie at the apex of the American national-imperial state, forged during the Second World War. . . . While dedicated to war, the new research laboratories. . . . shifted the trajectory of technological development . . . to . . . the reorganization of social life at a higher level of abstraction. . . . The 'leveling domination of abstraction', to use Adorno and Horkheimer's phrase, involved levelling in two senses: leveling as in flattening—such as the colonial destruction of deep social relations and place-based practices—and levelling as in adding new layers, with the reconstitution of social relations by more abstracted practices"

Contrary to techno-feudal interpretations, the cyber-tech sector is unmistakably capitalist, driven by competition, investment and innovation, and subject to speculative bubbles and booms unheard of under feudalism—if also characterized by supposedly non-capitalist but thoroughly familiar practices like monopolization, market rigging, preferential nationalism and proximity to the military-industrial complex. . . .

There have never been more compelling arguments to reduce inequality, to consume less, to live less energy-intensive lives, yet the tech-titans dedicate tremendous resources to encourage an increase in the production and consumption of wasteful, energy-intensive gadgets."

-Timothy Erik Ström

<https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii135/articles/timothy-erik-strom-capital-and-cybernetics>