Capitalism after Fordism

What comes after Fordism? A chaotic situation – at least if we follow Joachim Bischoff, an important organic intellectual of the German Left. In his book *Entfesselter Kapitalismus* ([Capitalism off the Leash]), he argues that there is no ‘new firmly established capitalist order’ (p. 7) that has succeeded Fordism-Taylorism (p. 54). His assertion is situated in a current debate among German Marxist social scientists as to whether or not capitalism has reached a new stage of development. Bischoff’s book should be seen as the antidote to Mario Candeias’s work on neoliberalism as a new ‘transnational capitalist mode of production and living’.

According to Bischoff, capitalism is going through an intermediate phase between two of its developmental stages; all recent developments are still overshadowed by the crisis of Fordism, which has not yet been overcome. He assumes there to be four aspects to this crisis: (1) the exhaustion of innovation potentials within the Fordist-Taylorist organisation of the labour process, (2) the erosion of support for economic policies centred on the notion of ‘steering’ national economies, (3) the incompatibility of the existing system of social security with the level of productivity achieved (and the individualist forms of subjectivity accompanying the latter), (4) the breakdown of the Bretton Woods system of international finance (p. 137).

Bischoff acknowledges that in reaction to this crisis a new hegemonic ideology has emerged, which is neoliberalism (p. 54), or, more precisely, the reliance on markets as a medium of societal coordination (p. 177). Moreover, he indicates that this dominance causes Rhenish state projects to adapt to Anglo-Saxon ones (p. 13). Nevertheless, he does not renounce his initial claim. According to him, this hegemonic ideology does not result in capitalism reaching a new stage for two reasons. He argues that neoliberal policies lead neither to an overcoming of the blockages in the sphere of production that prevented the advancement of Fordism-Taylorism (p. 154), nor to a new ‘civilisation’ of capitalist society as a whole (p. 158).

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1. I would like to thank Bob Jessop, Jörg Nowak, Andrew Sayer, Myfanwy Williams, Jim Kincaid and the editorial board of *Historical Materialism* for their insightful comments on my review.
2. Bischoff is member of the editorial board of the political journal *Sozialismus* and of the recently constituted Left Party.
3. All translations from German have been produced by the author of this text.
Periodisation, civilisation and societalisation projects

I suspect that the periodisation of capitalism implied here does not stand up to closer scrutiny. By employing the term ‘civilisation’, Bischoff indicates that the trajectory of the capitalist mode of production passes through different stages marked by inherent social stability and sustainability and messy intermediary, crisis-ridden phases in between. However, Bischoff has to face up to the problem that it would be hard to name any other stable stage of capitalist development than Fordism. Throughout its history, capitalism is accompanied by economic, political and social crises. In light of this, I object to periodising capitalism on the grounds of criteria arrived at by the generalisation of specific features of Fordism. This does little more than to override capitalism’s inherent instability and to confuse an exceptional situation with capitalism’s normality, that is, with its average mode of existence.

In contrast, I suggest the conceptualisation of the development of capitalism as a passage through different ‘societalisation projects’. With this term, I designate the dominance of a way of life grounded in a decisive economic nucleus, whereby social relations are ordered, social cohesion is generated, and the reproduction of the thereby established social order is ensured. Along these lines, I would argue that the incoherence of contemporary capitalism alone is not a sufficient reason for ruling out that there might be a new dominant capitalist societalisation project.

The issue at stake is obviously of high political relevance. The feasibility of strategies that attempt to ‘civilise’ capitalism rests on the possibility of making it socially stable and sustainable. As I will try to demonstrate in this review, there are no reasons to assume that this is a genuine possibility. To support my argument, I have chosen to include another book: Klassen und soziale Bewegungen [Classes and Social Movements], an edited volume on the relevance of class theory to understanding contemporary capitalism. I have done this for two reasons; first of all, it is an exemplary compilation of the achievements and failures of Marxist conceptions of class in the light of contemporary capitalism; secondly, it is co-edited by Bischoff, and hence can serve as a source of additional material both for reconstructing his line of argument and countering it. This ensures that my critique is not formulated from an external standpoint, but located within his discursive universe.

In the course of this text, I try to demonstrate: firstly, that Bischoff’s line of thought is flawed when it comes to explaining why there is no new project within capitalism; secondly, that these flaws result from looking at social cohesion in a one-dimensional manner; thirdly, that this highlights the need to replace such simplistic perspectives by a multi-dimensional account; and finally, that this multi-dimensional account undermines Bischoff’s political agenda of re-civilising capitalism.

6. Bischoff himself admits that Fordism had its ‘dark sides’ (p. 82), which he sees in the persistence of inequality on both the national and the international scale and the waste of resources for military purposes (p. 83). Accordingly, it is important not to overlook that stability was limited even then.

7. ‘Societalisation’ translates Marx’s concept of Vergesellschaftung (1983: p. 790), which designates processes by which practices are integrated into social formations. In German, a difference is made between gesellschaftlich [societal] and sozial [social], the former term bearing no normative implications as opposed to the latter.