
Review

Mute compulsion: A Marxist theory of the economic power of capital

Søren Mau

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How does capitalism sustain itself over time? Or, more polemically: ‘Why hasn’t capitalism collapsed yet?’ (p. 2). Marxists might answer this question in several ways. One approach, exemplified by the more deterministic strands of twentieth-century historical materialism, would say that capitalism, like every economic system, rests on certain technological preconditions or ‘forces of production’, which develop until their possibilities are exhausted and a new society can be born. A different approach, associated especially with ‘Western Marxism’, would say instead that capitalist economies rely on various extra-economic social relations – forms of power like violence and ideology – to overcome external pressures and internal tensions.

Søren Mau rejects both of these answers. Against technological determinism, he holds that social relations, not productive forces, are most fundamental to reproducing capitalism over time; yet he insists also that the preeminent relations in question are not the political and cultural forces of violence and ideology, but the economic power of ‘mute compulsion’. This term is drawn from Marx’s discussion in *Capital* of how ‘the domination of the capitalist over the worker’ ultimately rests on the power of ‘economic relations’ themselves, deploying ‘extra-economic force...only in exceptional cases’ (1976, p. 899). Mau carries this phrase beyond the sphere of work relations, making it the keyword of a larger social theory concerned as much with our political present as with Marx’s work itself.

Mute compulsion (or just ‘economic power’ – Mau usually treats the two phrases as synonyms) does not rely on dyadic interactions between agents. Unlike both ideology and violence, which ‘*directly* address the subject’, the economic power of capital ‘addresses the subject only *indirectly*, by acting on its *environment*’, the broader conditions through which society is reproduced (pp. 4–5, *emphases original*). Through economic power, the social world is so arranged that we become obliged to act in certain ways (and not in others) if we want to



maintain our everyday lives. This basic insight, of course, is a familiar one: most of us are compelled to go to work in the morning not because we are afraid of incarceration (an exercise of force against us) but because we are afraid of penury (a change in our conditions). But Mau is not simply interested in such compulsion as a background feature of capitalist society; he is interested in its everyday dynamics, its preconditions and functions, its minute operations and systemic mechanisms and all-too-quotidian expressions. Mau asks how we are disciplined by the capitalist conditions in which we live – how we are subjected to imperatives that make each of us into a certain kind of subject and gather all of us into certain kinds of populations.

This might seem a rather Foucaultian impulse for a Marxist theory. Mau indeed applauds Foucault's 'emphasis on institutional structures' and on 'the micro-level of everyday life', endorses his 'resolute break with state-centric conceptions of power', and cheers 'his critique of economism' (pp. 34, 35). In Foucault, Mau finds resources for overcoming the defects of traditional theories of power in political science and sociology – but he suggests that those resources are primarily descriptive, not explanatory. Foucault's unwillingness to theorise 'property relations and class structures' might not damage his account of how workers are disciplined in the factory, but it does leave him 'unable to answer the question of *why* workers show up at the factory gates in the first place' (p. 36, emphasis original). Mau's own project, then, can be understood as a materialist aetiology for Foucault's 'nominalist' symptomology.

In developing this diagnosis, Mau sometimes deploys another near synonym for economic power and mute compulsion: 'social domination'. Political theorists are most likely to be familiar with this variant term via Moishe Postone (1993), in whose *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* it becomes the keyword of Marx's critique of capitalist unfreedom. Occasional rhetorical flourishes notwithstanding, Mau's contribution is not to have simply discovered a third form of power, beyond the 'violence/ideology couplet' (p. 4) that no one had ever systematically examined; rather, the significance of *Mute Compulsion* rests on *how* Mau's account of social domination transforms that longer conversation. Where Postone's interpretation advances a situated analysis of capitalism alone, retreating from transhistorical philosophical claims, Mau appeals explicitly to human nature to explain the possibility of economic power itself. Where Postone deploys 'social domination' to argue that capitalist class power merely expresses the more basic domination of *everyone* by the value form (that is, by how capitalism reconfigures material wealth as economic value in the first place), Mau insists that class is fundamental to how value functions at all. Moreover, Mau builds on these arguments about the *conditions* necessary for social domination (Part I) and the *relations* through which it endures (Part II) to analyse its contemporary *dynamics* as well (Part III).



It is in Parts I and II that Mau offers his most original interpretations of Marx's texts. Partly through an unusual reading of the theme of 'corporeal organisation' in *The German Ideology*, he reconstructs Marx's theory of human nature in terms of the significance of tools for maintaining our biological life processes; this reliance on 'external' organs introduces a site of potential 'metabolic domination' that makes economic power possible in many forms. (If others control the instruments I must use to sustain my life, then they occupy a position of metabolic domination, and thus of economic power, over me.) Significantly, Mau argues that although human nature explains how economic power is possible in general, it cannot ground a critique of capitalism in particular. Since there is no transhistorically 'natural' metabolic relation that capitalism disrupts, the critique of political economy cannot begin from a romantic appeal to the human conditions underlying every mode of production but must issue instead from the analysis of specific social forms. Turning to such forms directly, Mau emphasises the distinction between 'horizontal relations of production' (intra-class relations among capitalists and among proletarians) and 'vertical relations of production' (capitalists' exploitation of proletarians).

This framework, deliberately abstract, lets Mau intervene in a range of somewhat technical debates about value and competition in *Capital*, while also allowing more limited attention to how varieties of difference other than class, such as gender and race, are shaped by capitalism's historical development. Across both Part I and Part II, Mau's detailed footnotes and synopses of earlier debates are a remarkable resource for specialists and neophytes alike, deftly surveying theoretical, historical, and political literatures from an astonishing range of Marxist traditions (albeit mostly of Western Europe and North America). These synthetic perspectives are often as insightful and rewarding as his own analyses and arguments; few recent books provide as wide ranging an introduction to other Marxist scholarship.

Mau's most robust contribution to the theory of power in *contemporary* capitalism comes in Part III. In four rich chapters, Mau shows how mute compulsion structures the dynamics of the workplace, how it underpins the destructive 'subsumption of nature', how it is exemplified by the 'logistics revolution' of transport and shipping, and how it secures its grip on human populations through – not despite – recurrent economic crisis. The book is worth reading for these chapters alone, which touch on more debates in political theory than can be surveyed here. (The emphasis on logistics rather than neoliberal financialisation is a particularly bracing contribution to the interpretation of postwar capitalism.) The fundamental conclusion is that, through its mute compulsion, 'capital posits its own presuppositions' (p. 226): the exercise of economic power creates the conditions for its further entrenchment, making a postcapitalist world ever more difficult to achieve.



Mau nonetheless ends with the hope that his contribution to ‘building abstract theories of capital’ can ‘assist the revolutionary effort to create communism’ – while acknowledging frankly that ‘the role of theory in such an endeavour is bound to be very limited’ (p. 324). The purpose of radical theory is not to construct programmatic solutions in advance but to offer ‘carefully constructed concepts’ that can inform other kinds of conjunctural work (p. 325). To expect a more complete strategic pronouncement would be the wrong kind of demand for a book like this one, which is as measured as it is ambitious.

Yet precisely in these terms, the book leaves a fundamental conceptual question unresolved. Should communists aim for economic power to be abolished, or aim instead for it to be transformed? Here Mau might have done well to return to the debates over violence and ideology, those other basic kinds of power. Marxists typically agree that classless society will not require much organised coercion to endure; more contested has been the question of whether the communist world will exhibit a ‘communist ideology’, yet even those that use ‘ideology’ strictly as a pejorative term imagine that the distorted consciousness of the present can be transformed into new modes of thought in the future. Which image offers the better analogy for the place of economic power in our ‘revolutionary effort’? The answer to this question, which Mau does not ask, will determine the role of his own carefully constructed concepts in the political work to which he dedicates them.

Data availability

The book review does not generate or analyse any datasets.

References

- Marx, Karl. 1976. *Capital*. Volume 1. Trans. Ben Fowkes. Penguin.
Postone, Moishe. 1993. *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*. Cambridge.

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Matt Shafer
Florida International University, Miami, FL 33199, USA
mshafer@fiu.edu