

*Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, Mark Fisher, Winchester: Zero Books, 2009

### Abstract

Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* is a provocative polemical analysis of the narrowing of political horizons that has occurred over the past couple of decades and of the powerful ideological grip that capitalism holds on the collective, social psyche, destroying our capacity to imagine political alternatives. Fisher seeks to illuminate the major cultural and social effects of a post-Cold War politico-ideological condition in which (according to Žižek's well-known observation) 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism'. Building on this analysis, Fisher identifies some key tensions and contradictions in the ideological armour of contemporary capitalism and extrapolates from this some tentative strategic propositions for the anticapitalist Left. This review-article argues that, while Fisher's book provides valuable conceptual and strategic resources for the Left, it is hamstrung by several weaknesses – not the least of these a tendency to make unconvincing, sweeping claims about the novelty and distinctness of what Fisher terms 'capitalist realism' and a tendency to present a caricature of current left-wing thinking.

### Keywords

critique of everyday life, capitalist ideology, philosophy, bureaucratisation, strategy, cultural criticism, book-reviews, Marxist political theory, neoliberalism

Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* is a provocative account of the prevailing ideological conditions of contemporary capitalist society. It is a short polemical analysis of the powerful ideological grip that capitalism exerts on the collective psyche, destroying our capacity to imagine political alternatives. This is Fisher's first book, but many readers may be familiar with his website, 'k-punk',<sup>1</sup> which brings radical criticism to bear on a broad range of cultural subjects and issues. The same wide-ranging eclecticism is evident in this book in which the author draws on a welter of examples and ideas from both 'popular culture' and 'high theory'. Fisher's style of exposition has a fast-paced, free-wheeling quality to it reminiscent of Slavoj Žižek's writing – and, indeed, there is a Žižekian audaciousness to many of the ideas that Fisher puts forward.

'Put at its simplest,' Mark Fisher explains (in an interview in which he discusses his book), 'capitalist realism is the widespread idea that capitalism is the only "realistic" political economic system'.<sup>2</sup> One of his central arguments in *Capitalist Realism* is that this idea has become the major legitimating ideological prop of the capitalist order today. Capitalism no longer presents itself as the 'best' social system amongst a range of possible alternatives in order to secure the ideological conditions necessary for its reproduction, but as *the only* feasible social order. It was, for Fisher, the collapse of the 'actually existing socialist states' of the Eastern bloc that ushered in this new form of ideological legitimisation. With the disappearance of these régimes and with the apparent final discrediting of the alternative they had claimed to represent, capitalism was free to present itself as 'the only game in town'. Fisher suggests that capitalist realism is the first really successful totalitarian ideological system – 'totalitarian' in the sense that it permeates deep into the psyche of

1. <<http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org>>

2. Wilson 2010.

contemporary individuals, structuring their understanding of the possible and erecting invisible barriers and limits to thought and to the imagination. Under conditions of capitalist realism, indeed, the idea of any practical alternative to capitalism becomes not just ‘unrealistic’ but literally *unthinkable* – as Fisher puts it; ‘it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to [capitalism]’ (p. 2).

Capitalist realism incorporates, for Fisher, a kind of atemporality. It announces that we have reached the ‘end of history’ and, in so doing, obliterates any sense of time as a constantly progressing continuum. Instead we live in an eternal present. Under conditions of capitalist realism it becomes apparently self-evident that (in Terry Eagleton’s words) ‘the future will be pretty much like the present only more so’.<sup>3</sup> The ‘futurity of the future’<sup>4</sup> is cancelled. Indeed, for Fisher, Francis Fukuyama’s famous but widely derided thesis<sup>5</sup> (developed at the very beginning of the period in which capitalist realism emerged) articulated a certain fundamental truth. It was not, *contra* Fukuyama, that the world was converging on some stable liberal utopia of free trade and perpetual peace. On the contrary, Fisher indicates that the world of capitalist realism is characterised by the ‘normalization of crisis’ (p. 1). What Fukuyama correctly articulated was a vision of the ideological self-image of the post-Cold War period that would come to predominate – an apparent narrowing of the bounds of political possibility and a widespread sense that capitalism had not only defeated its major manifest twentieth-century challenger, but that it had also, in so doing, destroyed once and for all the very possibility of serious challenge to its ascendancy.<sup>6</sup>

The cancellation of the future, Fisher argues further, also robs us of the past. Without novelty and change the significance of the past evaporates into nothingness. Capitalist realism’s eternal present gives rise to a collective social and cultural malaise. The absence of future and past drains the present of all meaning. Contemporary individuals, for Fisher, inhabit a melancholy and sterile world stripped of hope. It is a deeply unhealthy state of affairs in psychological terms which gives rise to profound anxieties and neuroses at both an individual and social level.

Fisher admits that his thesis is, in many ways, similar to Fredric Jameson’s account of postmodernism.<sup>7</sup> Fisher argues, however, that this does not make capitalist realism a superfluous concept, because what Jameson called postmodernism has become so deeply embedded in the collective psyche and the lived reality of people today that it has undergone a kind of qualitative transformation. As Fisher comments elsewhere, ‘Capitalist realism, you might say, is what happens when postmodernism is naturalized’.<sup>8</sup>

Having provided an account of the contemporary cultural malaise, the author’s focus shifts to an analysis of what he argues are two major aporias in capitalist realism and to a discussion of how these might be exploited by the Left.<sup>9</sup> Capitalist realism only *appears* to be seamless and all-encompassing. The naturalisation of capitalism is a measure of capitalist

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3. Eagleton 2002. Eagleton uses this phrase in a slightly different context, but it seems appropriate here.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Fukuyama 1992.

6. Of course, Fukuyama believed all of this to be true rather than merely apparent.

7. Jameson 1991.

8. Wilson 2010.

9. Here, indeed, Fisher goes beyond Jameson in identifying specific weak-points in the almost

realism's effectiveness as an ideology, but all ideological systems, Fisher suggests, no matter how deeply embedded in the social fabric, have their weaknesses. The way to combat capitalist realism is to identify and tease out its gaps, tensions and contradictions. 'Capitalist realism', he states, 'can only be threatened if it is shown to be in some way inconsistent or untenable; if, that is to say, capitalism's ostensible "realism" turns out to be nothing of the sort' (p. 16). The two major contradictions in capitalist realism on which Fisher concentrates are mental health and bureaucracy. Many of Fisher's examples in relation to these two aporias are drawn from the world of further education.

*Contra* the neoliberal assertion that 'free-market' consumerism is liberating for individuals, neoliberal capitalism, according to Fisher, 'installs a perpetual anxiety – there is no security: your position and status are under constant review'.<sup>10</sup> In such conditions a range of mental-health problems – depression especially – proliferate. Since today's burgeoning rates of depression and other forms of mental illness are largely socially and structurally generated they cry out, as Fisher argues, for radical social and political solutions. Yet 'the current ruling ontology denies any possibility of a social causation of mental illness' (p. 37) and insists that these are treated simply in terms of biological-chemical imbalances within specific individuals. The 'chemico-biologization of mental illness', Fisher notes, is 'commensurate with its depoliticization' (p. 37). Nevertheless, mental illness is one area in which capitalist realism might be challenged by Left-forces prepared to 'repoliticise' depression and mental distress – as Fisher argues, the "mental health plague" in capitalist societies would suggest that, instead of being the only social system that works, capitalism is [actually] inherently dysfunctional' (p. 19).

The second aporia on which Fisher focuses is bureaucracy. Neoliberal capitalism likes to present itself as radically anti-bureaucratic. Neoliberalism, indeed, is often *defined against* an antithetical bureaucratic Other – 'socialism' or postwar social democracy, which was supposedly characterised by inefficiency, institutional sclerosis and bureaucratic centralisation. Yet the official ideology of neoliberalism 'is at odds with the experiences of most people working and living in late capitalism' (p. 20). Fisher points out that 'new kinds of bureaucracy – "aims and objectives", "outcomes", "mission statements" – have proliferated, even as the neoliberal rhetoric about the end of top-down, centralized control has gained pre-eminence' (p. 40). In fact, these new forms of administration and regulation are, if anything, *much more intensely bureaucratic* than previous kinds.

As he does for mental health, Fisher draws on examples from the world of education. The bureaucratic measures that he specifies will be painfully familiar to many readers of this journal – endless implementation of new procedures designed to assess and 'measure' teaching and research-'performance', the grading of research-'output' as part of the 'Research Excellence Framework' and countless other forms of 'target'-fetishism, hoop-jumping and pointless quantitative assessment of often unquantifiable forms of labour. As Fisher points out, these new forms of bureaucracy are certainly not confined to higher and further education – they are ubiquitous throughout much of the public sector (and beyond). Such measures are, in a qualitative sense, much more oppressive and stifling than earlier Fordist forms of bureaucracy, Fisher suggests. This is because those subject to these procedures are

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all-encompassing grip of capitalist ideological hegemony and in offering some relatively concrete suggestions in relation to a counter-hegemonic offensive.

10. Wilson 2010.

forced to become complicit with them – they demand, and indeed very largely *consist in*, a kind of perpetual ‘auto-surveillance’ or internal policing on the part of individuals caught up in this system of administration and assessment.

Fisher points out that, inevitably, a ‘short-circuiting’ process occurs. Those caught up in this régime of surveillance know precisely what sort of data the system requires – what sort of ‘audited *representation*’ of their ‘performance and output’ it wishes to see – and so ‘work becomes geared towards the generation and massaging of representations rather than to the official goals of the work itself’ (p. 42). The auditing process, then, becomes more and more pointless – less and less reliable as an indicator of actual work-‘performance’ and increasingly useless as a means of actually improving ‘standards’. Bureaucracy in neoliberalism becomes an end in itself – *sui generis* – but which requires ever-increasing layers of management and of (further) bureaucracy to administer.

Fisher identifies an interesting process of collective pretence that accompanies this system of bureaucracy – one that, ironically, resembles one of the processes that characterised those most bureaucratic of states in the Eastern bloc. In the Stalinist states, Fisher suggests, (presumably) all of those responsible for the administration of the system must have been aware that it was shabby and corrupt. Yet they were required to pretend that they had not noticed – *to act as if* the official ideological representation of the system was accurate. A similar process occurs under neoliberalism – everybody caught up in neoliberal régimes of surveillance *knows* (and, indeed, everybody knows that everybody knows) that the bureaucratic tasks they are required to carry out are pointless, but continue to perform them anyway. Here, Fisher brings in Lacan’s concept of the ‘big Other’. Who, Fisher asks, is the consumer of the bureaucratic data we produce? Who is the naïve, gullible subject for whom this material is prepared? It is the big Other. We carry out these tasks in order both to conform to the expectations of this collective fiction and in order to trick it.

The ideologues of neoliberalism like to argue (much as the postmodernists have)<sup>11</sup> that free-market capitalism does away with collective fictions (‘there is no such thing as society’). Yet the continuing centrality of the ‘big Other’ figure in the collective psyche under neoliberalism gives the lie to this claim. This is one of the ways in which, for Fisher, the self-image of neoliberal capitalism is contradicted by its actual practice. The major point Fisher draws from his analysis of bureaucracy, however, is that the anti-bureaucratic credentials that neoliberalism claims for itself are claimed falsely. Fisher believes that capitalist bureaucracy is a weak-point that can be exploited in order to loosen the capitalist-realist ideological grip on the contemporary imagination. He argues that the Left should build on the desires for a massive reduction of bureaucracy that neoliberalism tapped into but has been incapable of satisfying. Reduction of bureaucracy requires a struggle to democratise the workplace, Fisher suggests – an assertion of worker-autonomy.

In the final chapter, Fisher advances some further suggestions in relation to a strategy for the defeat of capitalist realism. He argues that the recent credit-crisis and bank bail-outs have severely discredited neoliberalism and that this has opened up a significant space for strategic manoeuvre on the part of the Left. Yet Fisher warns that the current crisis of neoliberalism is not yet a crisis of capitalist realism and that, further, the Left is still wedded to modes of thought and methods of organisation and struggle that will prevent it from

11. As Fisher points out, Lyotard’s notion of ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ mirrors neoliberal claims that free-market capitalism dissolves the collective fantasies of earlier periods.

successfully converting this crisis into a serious challenge to capitalism itself. Fisher implies that many on the Left hoped or even expected that the credit-crisis, when it broke, might bring down capitalism. However, ‘speculations that capitalism might be on the verge of collapsing soon proved to be unfounded’ (pp. 77–8) and further: ‘It quickly became clear that, far from constituting the end of capitalism, the bank bail-outs were a massive reassertion of the capitalist realist insistence that there is no alternative. Allowing the banking system to disintegrate was held to be *unthinkable*.’ (p. 78.) While the assumptions of neoliberalism were seriously shaken by the crisis, those of capitalist realism were not. ‘We can now see that, while neoliberalism was necessarily capitalist realist’, he comments, ‘capitalist realism need not be neoliberal’ (p. 78). Even so, capitalist realism has yet to settle on a coherent replacement for neoliberalism and this period of uncertainty on the part of capital presents a significant opportunity for the Left.

Fisher feels, however, that the organised Left is currently hamstrung by its continuing adherence to inadequate and outdated ideas. For example, Fisher excoriates the Left for ‘limiting its ambitions to the establishing of a big state’ (p. 77). He criticises, too, its unimaginative attachment to old forms of industrial action. The most significant problem, he suggests, is that the Left is committed to the politics of what he calls ‘immobilisation’ – that is, protest in the name of *resistance to change* rather than to *struggle for change*. The politics of immobilisation implicitly concede that ‘capitalism can only be resisted, never overcome’ (p. 28) and furthermore, according to Fisher, often amounts to a demand that governments return to the comforting certainties of Fordism – a nostalgia for a bygone social-democratic capitalism rather than any sort of challenge to capitalism itself. However, ‘an effective anti-capitalism’, Fisher continues, ‘must be a rival to Capital, not a reaction to it. . . . Anti-capitalism must oppose Capital’s globalism with its own, authentic, universality’ (p. 79).

The key to building such an oppositional, rival universality, according to Fisher, is to resurrect and take seriously the concept of the ‘general will’ – that is ‘the idea of a public space that is not reducible to an aggregation of individuals and their interests’ (p. 77). As Fisher indicates in his interview with Fuller,<sup>12</sup> one could understand the concept of the ‘general will’, here, in terms of an alternative big Other – an egalitarian and socialist big Other. Here, Fisher draws on Žižek’s arguments in relation to the inescapability of the big Other – of the inevitability and necessity of such a symbolic fiction for society to function.<sup>13</sup> What he proposes is the construction of a new symbolic fiction that could be counterposed to the prevailing one(s) under capitalist realism in order to provide coherence to a socialist challenge to the system. In this respect, Fisher’s approach shares much common ground with Badiou’s ideas in relation to ‘the communist hypothesis’<sup>14</sup> and with Peter Hallward’s work on ‘the politics of prescription’<sup>15</sup> – indeed Hallward, like Fisher, seeks in particular to revive the idea of the ‘general will’ or ‘will of the people’ as the appropriate politico-philosophical embodiment, or bearer, of a new egalitarian symbolic fiction.<sup>16</sup>

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12. Fuller 2009.

13. Žižek 1999.

14. Badiou 2010.

15. Hallward 2005.

16. See Hallward 2009.

Such an egalitarian big Other will not emerge spontaneously. One of the prerequisites for the emergence of such a collective identity, Fisher suggests, is that individuals are freed from the consumerist lassitude in which they are currently trapped and this requires organised political intervention on the part of what Fisher terms a 'Marxist Supernanny'. The idea of a 'Marxist Supernanny' is certainly one of the most provocative ideas in the book and one with which many readers will be instinctively uncomfortable. In the television-programme *Supernanny*, the eponymous protagonist turns up at the houses of parents with out-of-control children to 'sort out problems of socialization that the family can no longer resolve' (p. 71). Invariably the problem Supernanny identifies is that the children have not been provided with the 'order' or 'structure' that they need. Supernanny knows that children are unable to identify their own interests and that without an authority-figure in charge who will refuse to cave-in to their immediate demands, their behaviour will degenerate into a chaotic hedonism that, in fact, makes them profoundly unhappy. A 'Marxist Supernanny', according to Fisher, would do much the same thing for society as a whole. It would identify the structural causes that give rise to social dysfunction and would 'be the one who laid down limitations, who acted in our own interests when we are incapable of recognising them ourselves' (p. 76). Fisher is never quite clear how seriously we are meant to take the idea of a 'Marxist Supernanny', what organisational forms it would take, or who exactly might act in its name. Nevertheless, he does indicate that 'artists and media professionals' might play a key rôle. He calls for those employed in broadcasting to produce intellectually challenging pieces of work – to return to something like the BBC's postwar public-service ethic. This kind of 'paternalism', Fisher suggests, is not the same as 'elitism'. On the contrary, it treats its audience with respect – as people capable of dealing with complex ideas.

Fisher is attempting to do something very important in this book. His aim is to grasp the central features of the political-ideological landscape in which we are currently located, and to identify a possible route of exit. It has a practical, strategic purpose – and fresh strategic thinking is precisely what is needed at a time when, even though capitalism is being shaken by severe economic crisis, the radical Left seems incapable of making significant political headway. Nevertheless, Fisher, in my view, is not entirely successful in this endeavour and, despite its considerable strengths, the book contains several weaknesses.

I remain unconvinced by one of Fisher's central contentions: that we have moved into a period *qualitatively* distinct from others in terms of the prevailing ideology. Fisher shares with postmodernists, in my view, a tendency to exaggerate the novelty and distinctness of the present – and there indeed (notwithstanding Fisher's, for me, not wholly convincing attempts to draw a distinction between capitalist realism and the condition of postmodernity) is one indication of the non-novelty of capitalist realism. The feeling of having reached 'the end of history', in which it seems there is nothing left to do but to play with the wreckage of past belief-systems and with inherited cultural and artistic artefacts now drained of all meaning, is nothing new. Fisher, indeed, references T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, published in 1922, which surely articulates the very sense of melancholic cultural and social paralysis, disillusionment and atemporality that Fisher suggests is characteristic of capitalist realism.

Fisher's account of capitalist realism can be situated within a broader trend in recent thinking – a return to a discourse of chronic alienation. The recent anarchist text, *The Coming Insurrection*,<sup>17</sup> for example, although very different in many respects, shares much

17. The Invisible Committee 2009.

common ground with Fisher's book in terms of its diagnoses of the various sicknesses and neuroses afflicting modern society – characterised by a stultifying collective sense of alienation. There is much in common with Oliver James's recent work on mental distress and alienation under conditions of neoliberalism too.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, this discourse is very much a *revival* of ideas that have been in circulation for many decades. One can see very similar accounts of how capitalism gives rise to acute alienation and deep-rooted social neuroses in texts from the 1950s and 1960s – in the work of Fromm, Marcuse, Debord and R.D. Laing, for example. All of this suggests that there is nothing really very new about what Fisher observes in terms of modern alienation.

Fisher is right to argue that the idea that 'there is no alternative' has come to define politics and economics in the present period to an extent that has probably never been seen before and that this has entailed major social and cultural effects. However, I doubt that this narrowing of political horizons in recent years has been quite as dramatic as Fisher suggests. As we have seen, Fisher suggests that the collapse of 'really-existing socialism' was one of the major catalysts for the onset of the capitalist-realist assumption that capitalism is 'the only game in town'. The logic of Fisher's argument implies that the apparent alternative represented by 'really-existing socialism' came to be seen by most people not simply as one form of alternative, but as the only alternative to capitalism – and this seems about right. But for a long time before the Eastern-bloc states collapsed, very few people saw the alternative they represented as an attractive one. So, long before capitalism appeared to become the only *feasible* political and economic system, it had seemed, to many people, to be the only *acceptable* one. The difference between acceptable and feasible, here, seems to be minor. If capitalism appears to be the only acceptable system then it *is*, to all intents and purposes, the 'only game in town'. One could argue, then, that the onset of capitalist realism, as Fisher describes it, began long before 1989.

In fact one often feels that what Fisher is really addressing here is not so much the social effects arising from the apparent closing down of alternatives *to* capitalism in recent years, as those arising out of the apparent closing down of alternatives *within* capitalism. The last few decades, of course, have seen a relentless assault on the tenets of social-democratic politics and Keynesian economics by neoliberal ideologues. It has been so successful that alternative schools of thought within bourgeois economics and politics have been almost entirely excluded from the mainstream. This, it strikes me, is where most of the narrowing of political-economic horizons has occurred in the period on which Fisher focuses. Of course, none of this is to suggest that Fisher is wrong to argue that the idea of socialism has been largely banished from the purview of popular consciousness. I think he is mistaken, however, to suggest that disbelief in the possibility of socialism is qualitatively more advanced today than it was before 1989 and mistaken, furthermore, to suggest that it is the ideological domination of capitalism in a general sense, rather than the domination of a particular (and particularly noxious) *variant* of capitalism that really defines the present period.

One of the major frustrations of the book is that Fisher is never quite clear about what *exactly* capitalist realism is – or, at least, where its conceptual boundaries lie. Of course it is quite possible to grasp what he means by the concept in the broad terms that are set out towards the beginning of the book; that it is a 'pervasive *atmosphere*' (p.16) – the 'widespread

18. James 2007 and 2008.

sense' (p. 2) that there is no alternative to capitalism. It becomes a rather slippery concept, however, as the book progresses and as Fisher tries to add further substance to the term. In Fisher's discussion of mental health and bureaucracy, for example, it is never made clear whether Fisher sees the forms of mental illness and the 'audit-culture' associated with neoliberalism as, in some sense, component parts of capitalist realism (that is, as manifestations of capitalist realism itself), as symptoms of it (as illnesses/processes distinct from, but directly caused by, capitalist realism), or as pernicious social effects of contemporary capitalism more widely which are simply reproduced indirectly by capitalist realism (in that the latter helps to reproduce capitalism). This frustrating vagueness at the heart of the book might well be bound up very intimately with Fisher's fast-paced writing style. The free-wheeling way in which Fisher writes is one of the book's pleasures but it has an unfortunate flip-side – one cannot help feeling that Fisher's argument has a certain cavalier quality to it. That is to say that it tends to move from idea to idea without quite dwelling on any of them long enough for Fisher to really consolidate his argument or reasoning before moving on to the next one. It is easy to suspect, as one is hustled along to the next dazzling point, that, if Fisher stopped to examine more closely the concepts and ideas he develops, many of them might start to unravel.

I was unimpressed by some of what Fisher had to say in relation to left-wing strategy. There is always something implicitly old-hat about claims that we are living in 'new conditions' that require 'new thinking' and the jettisoning of 'old-fashioned' forms of organisation and struggle. There is a history of such claims on the Left that goes back at least as far as Bernstein – leftist thinkers have regularly proclaimed established socialist-political traditions to be 'out-dated' ever since (Crosland, Lyotard and Giddens amongst others). This is not to deny, of course, that the Left needs to adapt its thinking to changing circumstances. Fisher rather overstates his case, however, with exaggerated claims of novelty that many readers will feel they have encountered many times before. It does not help that Fisher tends to present a misleading picture of established left-wing thinking. When he writes, for example, that 'it is now evident that the credit crisis will not lead to the end of capitalism all by itself' (p. 78), it is clearly implied that some on the Left thought this might happen. What serious left-wing thinker, however, believed that the crisis might lead to the collapse of capitalism 'all by itself'? Fisher advances another caricature in relation to the Left's approach to the state. Since when have the contemporary *radical* Left wanted to set up a 'big state', rather than to radically democratise what are currently state-functions? Perhaps Fisher is talking about 'the Left' in a broader sense here – encompassing social democrats and the centre-Left – but, if so, he does not make this at all clear.

Fisher's excoriation of the Left for its commitment to 'immobilisation' and 'resistance' to change is also rather wide of the mark. Fisher is right that a crucial part of any anticapitalist strategy must be the development of an authentic socialist universality. However, he is wrong to suggest that resistance to capitalism, on the one hand, and the construction of a serious challenge to it, on the other, are mutually exclusive strategies. The traditional Marxist approach to this, of course, would be to say that there is a dialectical relationship between defensive struggles to resist the depredations of capital and offensive struggles to replace it. One cannot help feeling that Fisher is presenting a caricature of 'traditional' socialist thought in a rush to proclaim the necessity of new thinking.

Amongst the most interesting things about *Capitalist Realism* is that Fisher tries to rehabilitate a number of concepts that have become quite unfashionable on the Left –



key amongst these, ‘authority’ and the ‘general will’. Indeed ‘authority’ is, for many, a dirty word – something regarded as self-evidently politically suspect. One of Fisher’s purposes is to ‘think through the opposition between authority and authoritarianism’.<sup>19</sup> Many left-wingers simply assume that the two are synonymous, but ‘it is clear that culture and politics can’t proceed without some kind of authority structure’.<sup>20</sup> This is an important point and Fisher is to be admired for his unabashed defence of the necessity of authority. Similarly, Fisher, in my view, is right to argue that something like the notion of the ‘general will’ is indispensable for the Left and for any conception of socialism.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to know what to make of the closely related suggestions Fisher makes in relation to left-wing ‘paternalism’ and what he calls a ‘Marxist Supernanny’. I am still unsure exactly how seriously or how literally we are meant to take these ideas. Clearly, an element of tongue-in-cheek playfulness is involved. It is also fairly clear that the concept of the Marxist Supernanny is bound up with Fisher’s ideas about a left-wing big Other – that is, the Marxist Supernanny refers as much to a collectively-shared symbolic fiction as it does to an élite-minority of individuals. Nevertheless it *does* also seem to signify the latter. There is something worrying about this. As we have seen, Fisher’s points about the necessity of authority are well made, and one would not want to fall into the kind of political childishness that regards any kind of leadership as, by definition, dangerous. Further, in terms of the ‘paternalist’ activity of specific individuals performing Supernanny functions, it is reasonably clear that Fisher has in mind, for the most part, nothing more sinister than what Fuller describes as ‘accentuating cultural seriousness’<sup>21</sup> – risk-taking on the part of artists, broadcasters and other cultural workers willing to produce intellectually demanding work for wide public consumption. Even so, there is still a disquieting element of political élitism to all of this – Fisher’s focus, in terms of strategy, seems to revolve very closely around the idea of action by a small group of people to free the majority from a state of childish wretchedness in which they are incapable of identifying their real interests for themselves. There is nothing about a dynamic of interaction between leaders and led, nothing about democratic mass-action. One wonders how *Marxist* this Marxist Supernanny really is.

*Capitalist Realism*, then, fails to convince in several key respects. The problem often boils down, at least in great part, to Fisher’s tendency to make unsupported and sweeping claims – not least in regard to the supposed qualitative distinctiveness of the capitalist-realist present. Nevertheless, for all its shortcomings and ambiguities, *Capitalist Realism* remains a valuable work of innovative social theory. It is also a highly readable book, not least because of the quality of Fisher’s (often very wry) anecdotal observations of life in capitalist-realist society. If for no other reason I would recommend the book to colleagues on the basis of his extraordinarily satisfying description of ‘call center angst’ (p. 64).

There is, however, much more to recommend the book than this. There is, for one thing, an impressive commitment to strategic thinking – Fisher wants us to think seriously about how to take advantage of the current economic crisis and the whole book is geared towards this aim. His identification of neoliberal bureaucracy and mental health as two key weak-points in the seemingly impenetrable ideological armour of contemporary capitalism is an especially important contribution in this regard. Fisher’s argument would have been

19. Fuller 2009.

20. *Ibid.* On this point, see also Žižek 1999.

21. Fuller 2009.

strengthened if he had been more careful to substantiate his claims in relation to the supposed novelty of the current period. The argument could also have been made stronger, perhaps, if it had considered the extent to which the prevailing assumption today that ‘there is no alternative’ is rooted in the apparent closing down of alternatives within capitalism – alternatives to neoliberal capitalism that is – just as much as in the apparent collapse of confidence in the possibility of socialism. Further, Fisher’s ideas in relation to strategy might have been improved had he attempted to integrate his discussion of authority and concepts such as the ‘general will’ and the ‘Marxist Supernanny’ into a more dialectical account of the relationship between leadership and mass-struggle ‘from below’ in socialist politics.

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