The Will to Progress and the Twofold Truth of Capital
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All that is solid melts into air

In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels make a strange rhetorical move. In the middle of chapter 1 the text – a pamphlet, a call to arms, really – breaks out into a rare but somewhat effusive tribute to the bourgeoisie. Why? Because the bourgeoisie is, to this day, the most revolutionary force in history.

> The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations in society… All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.
> (Marx and Engels [1848] 1998, 54; also see Berman 1988, 89)

The instability of market societies is nothing new. Like a living organism, bourgeois capitalism grows and expands by destroying its old shells, leaving behind the chrysalides of antiquated structures, technologies, and ideas. Capitalists can never rest: their inexorable search for profit leads them to constantly undermine their own production base, a process that Joseph Schumpeter, who was a fine reader of Marx, termed "creative destruction" – the opening of new markets, the creation of new capacities, product innovations, which "incessantly revolutionize the economic structure *from within*, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one" (1950, 83). Silicon Valley, close to where I live, is replete with these "entrepreneurial chaos monkeys," to use Antonio Martinez's felicitous metaphor, who "pull the plug on one industry after another, … from taxi medallions (Uber) to traditional hotels (AirBnB) to dating (Tinder)" (2016, 103).

"All that is solid melts into air." The image is exhilarating, but also ominous. Capitalism's extraordinary transformative power is directed both at the world and at itself. Again, both Schumpeter and Marx point out that there is something deeply tragic about this frenetic quest to transform and rationalize. It is tragic because the pressure is relentless. "Competition of the kind we now have in mind," Schumpeter argues, "acts not only when in being but also when it is merely an ever-present threat. It disciplines before it attacks. The businessman feels himself to be in a competitive situation even if he is alone in his field" (1950, 85). The quest is also tragic because it brings about its negation. For Schumpeter the process of creative destruction means that while capitalism delivers material prosperity, it is constitutionally unable to produce a stable social order. This combination of "secular improvement that is taken for granted" and "individual

insecurity" is deadly: it means that the system cannot help but foster emotional detachment, if not hostility (159–60). Worse, capitalism's own political and cultural superstructure nurtures precisely those intellectuals and ideas that are most antagonistic (including, quite prominently, the social sciences). These ideas will ultimately be the main cause of capitalism's downfall.

What Marx and Schumpeter saw, better than anyone before or since, is the extent to which the evolutionary and dynamic nature of capitalism breeds actionable resentment. They also recognized the dynamic nature of the cultural universe in which the constant revolution in productive forces takes place. Here I want to take seriously the idea that capitalism is not simply an incessant economic struggle for the imposition of new forms, instruments, and relations of production, but also a cultural struggle to impress the idea that these upheavals, far from leaving everyone in the dust, will actually make the world a better place. How else would the tragic compulsion of the capitalist be bearable; how else would the havoc wrecked in his wake be made acceptable? Modern philanthropy was born out of this struggle: from the barons of industry of the Gilded Age to the mid-century tycoons to present-day tech billionaires; from Commodore Vanderbilt to Henry Ford to Mark Zuckerberg; the desire to be remembered as a transformative force that benefits humanity has been irresistible.[1] In the process, the intellectual class that so unnerved Schumpeter was partially coopted.

The twofold truth of capital

But philanthropy – redeeming past sins through present and future good works – is just one of the channels through which capitalists' will to progress expresses and legitimizes itself. It's what we may call "the Catholic way." The other way – the more Protestant way – is tech-utopianism, what I will describe here as "the twofold truth of capital."

I take the concept of a "twofold truth" from Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu first articulated the co-existence of two opposing truths in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), in a critique of the Lévi-Straussian interpretation of the gift.[2] In *Pascalian Meditations*, he reworked the argument about the gift and extended the notion of "twofold truth" to labor. The concept captures his effort to hold together analytically "the point of view of the agents who are caught up in the object and the point of view on this point of view, which the work of analysis enables one to reach" (2000, 1989). Thus the "twofold truth of labor" refers to the subjective, rather than simply external and objective, experience of labor exploitation. The fact that people derive an intrinsic satisfaction from doing their job well, no matter how menial it may be, and the "minor privileges" they have

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1   Steve Jobs, however, was rather cynical about it.
2   Bourdieu shows that it is precisely the delay between gift and counter-gift that allows the exchange to be perceived as gratuitous (2000).

seized upon and still enjoy in the workplace, help mask, and therefore render more effective, the overall exploitative nature of the system they labor in (2000, 202–205). Hence the people who experience small gratifications and victories in the work process end up by their own actions (what Burawoy [1986] calls "making out") unwillingly aiding the logic of capital.

Likewise, we can think of the twofold truth of capital as the social game specific to entire sections of the economic field, where the ambition to do well becomes closely intertwined, and sometimes equated, with the desire to do good. Below the objective truth of the entrepreneurial logic those who foster (and ultimately benefit) from it want to project a second truth – feelings of goodness and gratitude. In this moral universe, the creative destruction being unleashed onto societies via technological progress becomes reinterpreted as an agent of *social* progress. Part of that belief is indigenous to the engineering view of the world. As media historian Fred Turner perceptively argues in a recent interview, "the ethics of engineering is an ethics of 'does it work'? If you make something that works, you've done the ethical thing" (Logic 03). Indeed it is often in the most disruptive technological sectors, in those that devastate and reconfigure entire industries that this kind of barebones ethics blossoms, often with great earnestness and the self-righteousness of Those Who Have Seen the Light. (This view is especially easy to embrace since many start-ups lose – rather than make – money.) Remember Google's original motto: "Don't be evil." In hindsight the message looks naïve, but weren't we all once enamored with the company that brought us the simple, all-encompassing search bar, Google Maps, Google Earth, and Gmail? As I write these lines, a controversy has erupted within the company over Google 's involvement in Project Maven, a Pentagon program that uses artificial intelligence to interpret drone footage and is slated to be soon deployed in war zones.

But there is more. This dual truth, techno-utopianism, comes with its own kind of moral philosophy about *how* to make the world a better place. If we take the tech industry, for instance, the first principle of this philosophy is that the circulation of information and artificial intelligence makes the world run efficiently, it makes it more transparent, it empowers people, and all of that is inherently Good. So we set up physical infrastructures that, by default, facilitate maximal visibility (typically the process goes something like this: tech comes to us by way of "free" services to which we have "consented" by "signing" very opaque, and very intrusive, terms of service).[3]

The second belief is that technology is inherently egalitarian and democratic, and that is Good, too. Technology does not know any favorites. It judges impartially and on the basis of objective measures. The promise is of a world in which politics is unnecessary because everyone will get what they truly deserve.[4] Unfortunately, we now know that –

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3   For an explanation of the quotation marks, see Radin (2013).
4   As Turner, again, puts it: "When you take away bureaucracy and hierarchy and politics, you take away the ability to negotiate the distribution of resources on explicit terms" (Logic 03).

because technology is man-made and man-derived, and man is prejudiced – this belief is very deceptive. Algorithmic decision-making, like and because of its connection to human decision-making, has been shown to be biased in all sorts of unsavory ways. Furthermore, there is often no easy technical fix for these biases, so the technology does not even work well by the basic standards of engineering ethics (Burrell 2016; Kroll et al. 2017)!

The third belief is that connectedness is inherently Good, too – and thus we receive suggestions to connect with more "friends" on Facebook or to link up with more business acquaintances. Not only is this a belief that serves capital well, but digital connectedness does not necessarily mean social cohesion. Examples of the downside of this kind of social capital include filter bubbles, online bullying, or fake connections to Twitter bots. More importantly, by forcing everyone to disclose their positions to everyone else on every possible subject, social media might actually produce the inverse of solidarity, a fragmented politics in which shaming, on one hand, and ever more divided intersectional identities, on the other, proliferate quite easily.[5]

The twofold truth of the social sciences

So here are my two cents: the challenge for us social scientists today is to come to terms with the explicit or implicit models of society that inspire the economic projects of well-meaning and not-so-well-meaning techno-utopians. Their designs challenge us, first, to rethink our categories of analysis to keep pace with the changes that are happening in front of our very eyes (this has been a major focus of my recent work). Second, they challenge us to subject the *political claim*s coming out of that universe to a vigorous critique. Third, we cannot carry out this critique effectively if we don't take the folk ideology of capitalists seriously. We need to carefully peel all the layers of capital's twofold truth and reveal its logic, in order to understand not only how the intertwining of doing well and doing good nourishes the soul of modern entrepreneurs, but also how it helps their designs march forward with minimal interference and reflexivity on our part.

Are we well equipped to do this ourselves? Not as surely as we may think. Earlier I briefly gesticulated towards one problem, the fact that, as intellectuals – and American intellectuals especially –, we are never fully outside of the orbit of capital (even Marx relied on a wealthy industrialist friend to support him). But the current period is remarkable in another way, in that it is capital that increasingly concentrates the means of intellectual production by way of the big-data economy. It is capital that calls the shots on the shape of data collection, on the use of data, on what is and what isn't to be known. And it is often capital, too, that shares in or reaps the symbolic rewards, from Microsoft Research to Apple University to Intel Labs. For those of us who cooperate – and the numbers

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5   I am grateful to Christopher Muller for an enlightening conversation on this topic.

grow every year – the benefits are handsome. That next grant from Google, that *PNAS* paper, that TED talk may be ours. For the others the danger is one of obsolescence and exclusion from the real intellectual action. So social scientists face their own bad-faith problems, too: our historical position as social critics sits quite uncomfortably with our involvement in an academic game whose corporate-controlled institutions we depend upon.

It may be a long way before Joseph Schumpeter's prophecy will come to pass.

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