

Structure and the Other

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Market society, in the language of Karl Polanyi (2001 [1944]), represents the relentless spread of a societal order which places the pursuit of personal economic gain as the dominant organizing principal of social life. Rather than the principals of the market being confined to the economy, buffered and restrained by institutions and regulative practices, the raw cost/profit economic calculation has become embedded in the fabric of society itself. The costs of societal marketisation have left large swathes of society more vulnerable than before – removing many of the social safety-nets and increasing the level of insecurity and vulnerability. For Currie (1997), this movement has generated a new level of criminal deviance, sustained by a destruction of livelihood, withdrawal of public services and the spread of a materialistic ‘hard culture’. In other words, the values of a market society actively generate a new subaltern other which are pushed towards dispositions of violent and criminal activity. However, this paper highlights the need to look beyond this ‘downward gaze’ of the other and remain attentive to the oppositional one which, in Hegelian terms, reaffirms the sustained imagination which comes to define the other. In this sense the two remain intertwined in a matrix of causality and effect, the other reaffirming the status of the one and vice-versa. In the context of a market society, the representation of the other is determined through the negative outcome of the cost/profit calculation which is passed on as a negative externality and concentrated in marginalised sections of society.

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Since 2011, there has been a resurgence of activism across the globe in an attempt to resist what has come to be seen as an unjust and unfair approach to the global economy. Occupy was one of the largest ‘movements’, managing to spread across 951 cities and 81 countries in a matter of months following the initial call to camp at Zucotti Park, New York (near Wall Street). This paper is based on interviews that took place with Occupy: London in May 2012 (just before they were evicted).

Mark Fisher has suggested that, interpassivity – when “the object itself takes from me, deprives me of, my own passivity” (Žižek 2006:24) – can be seen in examples of resistive culture (such as the film ‘Wall-e’ which “performs our anti-capitalism for us” (Fisher 2009:12). In this way, the current paper suggests that we could apply this to some forms of activism to explain why some people feel like they are part of such movements without ‘properly’ joining them on the ground. Analysing some of the interview data, we find evidence that some people might be allowing the other to ‘relieve them of their passivity’ towards resistance and turning it into a kind of privatised rebellion rather than any real action against the system.

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This paper looks to apply Standing’s (2011) definition of the precariat to contemporary Brazil. The precariat is described as a relatively new class emerging from neo-liberal reforms of previous decades whose plight has become increasingly visible since the economic crash of 2008. Standing describes the precariat as a global class yet the majority of analysis concentrates upon insecure employment in OECD nations. In contrast to ‘developed’ nations, Brazil is undergoing a positive phase of sustained economic growth and stability with low unemployment and unprecedented income redistribution. The improvements in socio-economic indicators attributed to workers’ party government (PT) policies over the last ten years are widely celebrated both locally and globally particularly given the state of the world economy. Some influential Brazilian sociologists are quite skeptical about the much cited concept of a new emergent middle class, arguing that this section of the population are; ‘strugglers’ (Souza 2012) or the precariat (Braga 2012). Braga is critical of what he describes as the charismatic and populist domination of Lulaism impeding critical debate on employment and labour rights in Brazil. This paper looks to discuss whether the current much lauded trajectory of Brazil’s macro-economy neglects the precarious and insecure reality for many workers. This could be argued to have been the case in the OECD nations prior to the crash of 2008.