

## WHAT'S GOING ON HERE

This zine is part of a series of footnote zines to the project “Memetic Engines of Anticapitalism.” Due to a whole lot of complications (mainly involving chronic illness) the version of this zine is at some stage of draft, not the polished and complete edition.

All of these zines will be available for free online and in perpetuity when they're finished, and updated regularly in the meantime.

If you want to follow up, the QR code on the front of this zine will take you straight to the most recent web page edition and an archive of each iteration that was separately published.

For more general updates and information on the whole project, this QR code will take you straight to [memeticengines.com](http://memeticengines.com), where you can see the overview and any news about the works, sign up for the mailing list, or get in touch with me to ask clarifying questions.

### ZINES IN THE SERIES:

Replicate, Mutate, Select  
The Memetic Landscape  
This Is Propaganda  
Ethical Hypocrisy  
Little Ideas in Memetics  
Capital's Not Capitalism  
What Are Pacta  
Some other awful things that are inevitable under capitalism  
The Third Derivative of Value  
This Is George  
Self-Destruct, LLC.

### AND COMING SOON,

My Chronic Illness as a Case Study in the Shortcomings of Capitalism



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# CAPITAL'S NOT CAPITALISM:

an Unvocabulary

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version  $\beta$ 1



# Introduction

NOTE: This document is incomplete in at least 2 ways!  
This is also not an exhaustive list.

Leftists love theory. This can honestly make us a little bit frustrating to talk to sometimes, because we've mostly all read not quite the same combination of Marx plus a bunch of people you're less likely to have heard of. And we all have different favorites in that set. (Mine's Walter Benjamin.)

It starts with Marx not because we're all Marxists -- most of us aren't -- but whether defending, modifying, or refuting his work, pretty much all of 20th and 21st century economics and politics so far is built on the foundation Marx laid down.

The difficult thing about listening to a conversation with a bunch of people who really love theory, though, is that we can tend to get a little carried away with our use of technical terminology. Sometimes we flat out forget that the words we're using have connotations other than the technical sense in which we mean them.<sup>1</sup>

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1     Something a lot of people do, leftists very included, is that we want to make a simple statement like "X is bad." So we define X to only mean the subset of the colloquial X that meets the criteria for criticism we've raised.

This can be fine, if we're doing it from the perspective of making a complicated statement up front, but if we start with "X is bad" then add a postscript when someone points out that X is broader than just the bad parts, then we're just trying to justify having said something unfair, and that just makes things unnecessarily confusing.

For example: a while back somebody asked me a question on my tumblr watsons-solarpunk about landlords, and my response was, roughly, "Listen: Fuck landlords." Well, some folks took offence to that, particularly one person who pointed out that their mother made her only income by renting out space and isn't really able to make that money any other way.

I 'clarified' -- backpedaled, really -- by saying that I meant people who make a business model out of owning properties and extracting rent, especially those who would rather leave property empty than let someone live there for less than the

it's often treated as the most fundamental human motivation. The main distinction we make between types of organizations is for-profit and not-for-profit. And we often act like not-for-profit means the same thing as charity -- as though sharing the revenue with all the people who generated it is the same thing as giving away whatever the organization produces.

Critics might say that Marx advocated for the abolition of the ‘right’ to acquire property through the fruits of one’s labor, but Marx pointed out that laborers do not acquire the capital they produce. Rather, he said, the bourgeoisie acquires capital produced by laborers and subjugate them in the process. Thus, the capital that laborers produce serves to further exploit them.

Leftists who advocate for the abolition of private property are not arguing for the abolition of one’s right to accumulate private property. They’re just arguing that control of the spaces, machines, tools, and other structures necessary for production be returned to laborers so that they can access the fruits of their labor without restrictions imposed by the bourgeoisie.

## Profit

Speaking casually, it’s common to conflate different forms of income: profit, revenue, wage, etc., so if you don’t realize it’s being used in a technical sense, claims like “All profit is theft” can sound pretty ridiculous.

But profit is actually a very specific part of the overall set of income that a person can make. Profit is only what’s left over after all the costs of production are taken out. That includes paying wages to everyone involved in production.

So if a person buys a bunch of material and machinery, and hires people to use that material and machinery to make a product, and then sells that product and uses the money to pay themselves back for the upfront costs and to pay themselves and the other workers a wage, and there’s money left over, then they have a choice.

They could divide that money between all the people who helped create the value, or they could pocket it. If they pocket it, we call it “profit.”

Under capitalism, deciding to pocket the extra money isn’t just allowed,

The purpose of this zine isn’t to tell you exactly what leftists mean by any particular term. To figure that out, you’ll have to ask. (And in political and economic conversations, you should **always** get participants to define their terms.)

Instead, the purpose here is to give you a list of terms that get used in conversations about capitalism, and a sense of some of the things the people saying them might not mean.

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## Capital

Capital is commonly associated with financial value, such as currency, cash, stocks, or real estate. But capital, as a thing with value, is a concept that has meanings in economic systems outside capitalism. Capital existed in past feudal systems and may exist in future post-capitalist societies.

When you hear someone say that they are against capitalism, it does not necessarily mean that they are against people having anything that has value.

## Class

Class is a system of ordering a society in which people are divided into categories based on perceived social or economic status.

For Marx, a capitalist society consists of two classes: the bourgeoisie (or

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maximum they think they can extract. Rather than own the fact that I had unfairly maligned a group that’s broader and more nuanced than I wanted to criticize, I tried to act like I had been that nuanced all along and other people had just misunderstood. That was a shitty thing for me to do, and it’s a reflex that a lot of people have. It’s way easier to say “You misunderstood” than “I was wrong,” so if our brains can quickly find a way to do that, most of us won’t even realize we’re making that choice.

capitalists), who own the means of production and most of society's wealth, and the proletariat (or working class), who must sell their labor power in order to survive.

But class, as a method of classification, is not unique to capitalism. Class systems can exist in feudal societies or post-capitalist societies. In a post-capitalist world, a society may be divided into two classes: knowledge workers and service workers.<sup>2</sup> Rather than capital, land, or labor, knowledge would function as the basis of wealth.

## Market

When you think of a market, several concepts might come to mind: farmer's market, stock market, auction market, or, perhaps, a marketplace of ideas. All of these concepts are examples of voluntary exchanges of goods and services mediated by a currency. Currency is a fungible token of exchange that has a broadly agreed upon and relatively stable value. In capitalism, currency -- most commonly in the form of cash -- is understood to be an abstraction of labor done, but there's no reason it has to serve that function. It could come in the form of basic entitlements, or an allotment of rights to access resources. In this context, currency is used to mediate access to potentially scarce resources.

## Nation, State, Nation-State

People tend to use "nation" and "state" interchangeably, but they are often referring to a "nation-state."

- A nation is commonly considered to be an aggregation of people

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Drucker (1909–2005) outlined a possible evolution of capitalist society and transformation into a post-capitalist society in which knowledge functions as the basis of wealth. He predicted that this transformation would be completed between 2010 and 2020. It's 2018. (Peter Drucker, *Post-Capitalist Society*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1993.)

connected by a common culture and ethnicity, and tied to a particular shared territory or space.<sup>3</sup>

- A state is a political organization in a specific geographical area under the control of a centralized government.<sup>4</sup>
- A nation-state is a state organized around the premise that it governs, entirely and exclusively, a specific nation.

Leftists often emphasize this distinction, because many leftists would like to see the solidarity of nations shifted into a solidarity of class.

## Private Property

The idea "Abolish private property" is a popular one. That's a significant part of a lot of Leftists' political goals. And that makes those politics really easy to misrepresent, because in this context "private property" means something much narrower than just "stuff a person owns."

Marx distinguished between 'private' property and 'personal' property, and a lot of technical conversations about economies have retained that distinction. The idea is represented in the popular distinction between the Private and Public sectors of business. Your stuff isn't part of the private sector, or the public. It's not part of that system at all.

<sup>3</sup> Nineteenth-century French historian Ernest Renan (1823–1892) argued that the existence of a nation requires continued consent of its people, and that members of a nation are bound together by both collective memory and collective forgetfulness. (Ernest Renan, "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?", conference in Sorbonne, March 1882. <https://goo.gl/Cts2xk>.) Irish political scientist Benedict Anderson (1936–2015) defined a nation as an imagined political community. A nation is imagined because its members may never personally know every other member, but share common interests and a common identity within the nation. It is a community because, as Anderson explains, "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship." (Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.)

<sup>4</sup> By the time he wrote *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx considered the state to be "a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie." (Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848. <https://goo.gl/3ww39n>.)