

The Iron Cage of the Elites: Time Consuming Efforts to Stay on Top

Abstract for proposed Special Session:

Degrowth and social inequality: Eating the rich or governing the poor?

From a traditional leftist perspective centered on class-struggle, things are easy: The capitalist economy produces winners and losers. The rich, the winners, gain wealth, time and freedom, while the losers have to sell their time and their autonomy and remain poor at that. With respect to time, the difference is portrayed as the difference between those who can command over their time and those who have to do as they are told (when working). Alas, in my paper, I want to argue that this perspective is 1) not just too simple, it is 2) plain wrong – and it 3) even plays a significant role in reproducing the motivational energies to keep the growth-game in place and motion.

1) First, the so-called 'Winners' live in an iron cage: They are *inwardly* accelerated, activated and appropriated, they have habitualized and embodied the growth-logic of capitalism much more so than the 'losers'. For the latter suffer from *external pressures* (from the regulations and orders and demands of their bosses) – hence, they find ways and places and paces to resist, and to muster resources for opposition or revolution.

2) To have sovereign command over one's time does not mean that one is free from time-pressures. Quite to the contrary: While time-pressures from the working-place end with the fixed hour for those who have a fixed working-schedule such that their time is divided into heteronomous working-time and autonomous 'life-time', they tend to penetrate all spheres of life for those (academics, designers, managers) who work by self-determined schedules. *Remember that time is money*, Benjamin Franklin reminded us, but modern elites have to remember that time is knowledge (cultural capital), that time is relationships (social capital) and time is health/fitness (bodily capital). Elite competition demands the incessant investment of all forms of capital at all times.

3) That the 'losers' do not use these forces for revolution is in part attributable to the class-struggle narrative that portrays the activated, accelerated, sucked-in elites as the winners. While in fact these elites demonstrably suffer from rising rates of burnout, from chronic levels of cynicism (which precedes the former), even from a stress-related decline in life-expectancy (Japan) and from rising levels of adolescent suicides (due to competitive struggles for elite-education, e.g. in Korea and China), they are declared the 'Winners' of the system who occupy the desirable places and lead a desirable form of life, while in fact they are pitiable maniacs ruining the world and themselves. Hence, I will argue, to call them just that is a more promising route to eventually overcome social inequality than the traditional form of class-struggle.

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Summary for proposed Special Session:

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