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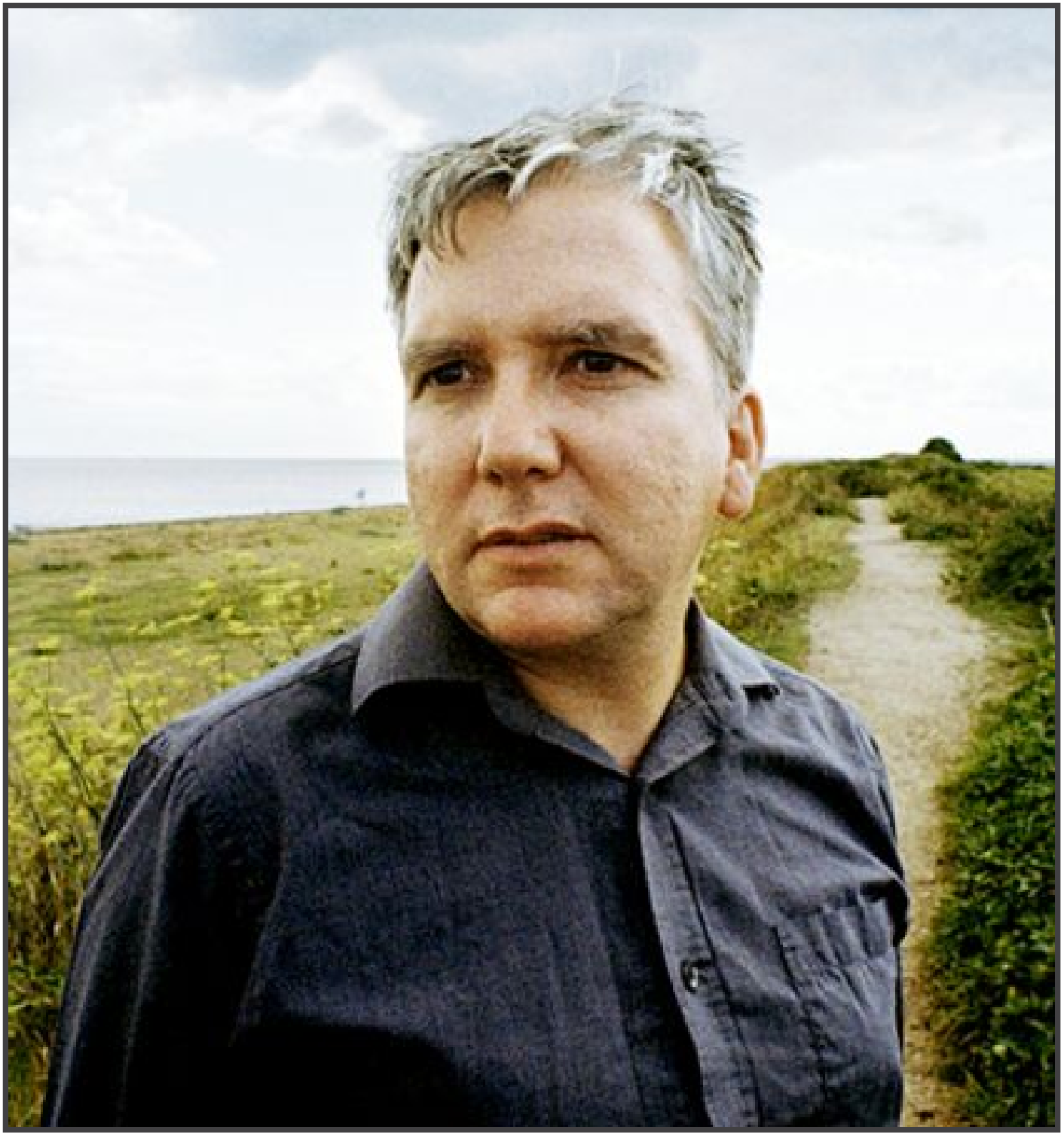
www.brand-new-life.org
office@brand-new-life.org



Summer was Coming: on Mark Fisher

Rory Rowan

The late Mark Fisher, arguably the most important cultural critic to emerge from the UK in the last two decades, explored the psychic, emotional dimensions of politics, forcefully arguing that contemporary mental health crises are the product of political conditioning. His work provides a set of critical tools for understanding the motivating passions and affective fallout of Brexit, Trump's Presidency and the rise of the European Far Right, not so much as ruptures within the smooth functioning edifice of liberal order but rather as symptoms of neoliberal capitalism and the deflated political subjectivities it both cultivates and relies upon. Fisher argues that under neoliberal conditions public institutions – including universities, broadcasters and museums – have become beholden to a punitive, restrictive managerialism leading many to reject them as sites for radical political activity and desire. However, Fisher argues, that spurning public institutions as inherently corrupt accepts the ideological ruse that there is no other path than neoliberalism and overlooks the possibility for alternative modes of organisation to release the radical potential locked dormant within them.



The immediate aftermath of Donald Trump's election and the Brexit vote to leave the European Union in 2016 was a sense of disbelief and numb horror among those opposed to the results. Liberal media commentators desperately looked for answers in the so-called white working class, the Russians, Cambridge Analytica and Facebook, but were unable to process the role played by their own failures of understanding. In the ensuing alienation from deep-seated epistemological securities, a cavernous trench opened up that seemed to swallow up any sense of self-recognition where once sure ground had stood. Many have commented that the fallout of these events was not only political but also cultural and even emotional: the global mood has darkened, divisions made visible now seem ever more entrenched, discourse has grown more antagonistic, and the major stakes of once seemingly minor matters have become manifest. While those for whom Brexit and Trump pose a more direct and immediate threat have long been more sanguine about the promise of the Republic (or in the case of the UK, the great historical fudge of a constitutional monarchy, now undergoing a slow multinational dissolution at the hands of the very democratic institutions it had staked its stability upon: ‹the Mother of Parliaments›), for many a liberal commentator they come as bolts from the dark and mark a deep psychic wound. Certainties have been dissolved and calm seas of national self-identity upset by sudden surges in popular resentments and anxious hatreds. This psychic, emotional element of politics was the terrain explored by Mark Fisher, arguably the most important cultural critic to emerge from the UK in the last two decades. As such his work provides a set of critical tools for understanding the motivating passions and affective fallout of these events, not least by allowing them to be understood not as ruptures within the edifice of liberal order but rather as symptomatic of neoliberal capitalism and the political subjectivities it cultivates.



Mark Fisher. Photo: Georg Gatsas

Fisher tragically took his own life in January 2017 after a very public struggle with depression; something with which he engaged bravely and unsparingly within his writing. A

prolific writer, he authored a number of books: *Capitalist Realism* (2009), *Ghosts of My Life* (2014), and *The Weird and the Erie* (2017) and edited two more, one on Michael Jackson, and one on the legacy of post-punk, as well as contributing music criticism to a number of magazines, notably *The Wire*. However, although Capitalist Realism almost immediately ascended to the status of instant classic and has had a broad influence, it was arguably on his blog K-Punk that Fisher's writing and thinking was at its most visceral. Many of these writings have recently been collected in the 800-page book *K-PUNK* (2018), edited by Darren Ambrose and published by Repeater Books, a press Fisher helped to establish. It was in these blog posts, along with his personal Facebook wall, that Fisher distilled his style, embracing a headlong rush into the affective flux of online communication, and embedded his most biting political analysis within the micro-dynamic turbulence of pop cultural change. Schooled in the tradition of British cultural criticism and attached to the radical working-class cultural forms of postwar Britain, or what he referred to as «popular modernism,» Fisher saw pop culture as a sphere both fraught with reactionary inertia and loaded with emancipatory potential: in Gramscian terms, a field of struggle. For those who were, like Fisher, attuned to the libidinal pulsations running through the everyday, pop culture provided a Geiger counter for tracing lines of political desire within the knotted stagnancy of the contemporary conjuncture. It is a testament to the wide cultural influence of Fisher's writing and the enduring importance of his insights into contemporary labor conditions, their political structuring and psychic impacts, that a posthumously published essay, *Accelerate Management*, acted as a point of convergence for the editorial forum within which this short article finds its place and a series of discussions around the role of institutions in contemporary art in the mountainous Swiss Canton of Glarus.

However, Fisher's influence stretched far beyond his written work and was perhaps most intense among a wide group of friends, collaborators, and a number of intellectual circles that he not only participated in but often gathered together, both in person and online. As his close friend, colleague, and collaborator Kodwo Eshun noted in the inaugural Mark Fisher Memorial Lecture at Goldsmiths in London in early 2018, it was in this capacity for bringing people together, his intellectual generosity and energy, his propensity to encourage those rendered marginal from institutions and dominant discourses, that Fisher's greatest impact was made, and for this he will be most dearly missed by many.[1]

In part because of the close friendships that Fisher sustained, and in part because of the tragic circumstances of his death, I speak about his work with a certain sense of trepidation. Many of Fisher's friends are better placed to speak to the importance of his influence and the nature of his work. Indeed, I gave much thought to whether I should even write about him now, but ultimately decided that I should given the impact his work has had on my own thinking and the kind of affective resonances I found with it. Fisher and I were not friends: we never met in person, but we were friendly, having been part of several shared intellectual circles and exchanged the odd message. I had expected that we would meet at some point, and hoped that a friendship might grow, but this sadly now remains part of a future that is no longer coming. As a writer, an interlocutor, a colleague and as a dear friend to many, Fisher had a profound capacity to touch people, to make them feel – realize – that they were part of something wider, and thus undo the isolating effects of programmed individualization and the vast effort that goes in to privatizing the material and psychic strains of living within conditions of neoliberal hegemony. I was one of those whom Fisher touched in this way. Indeed, his work has not only been a key source of intellectual inspiration and confirmation but also provided a crucial source of emotional support at an important juncture in my life when I was going through a debilitating period of depression. Fisher's writing assured me that I was not alone, or rather it helped me escape the punishing confines of that isolated ‹I› and locate myself as part of a wider collective; a collective that was not just a nostalgic fantasy of past class struggles or the aspirational phantom of the longed-for communist horizon, but a living

reality: a collective on which massive investment amounts of energy and effort were being spent to prevent it from recognizing itself as such, but that could nonetheless be sensed, could be felt, even in seemingly insignificant or fleeting details of everyday existence and in pop cultural forms, a sort of counter-tendency latent within the punitive mundanity of neoliberal hegemony.

In a perverse paradox, it was whilst living in London in 2010 as the new ham-faced Tory coalition government were rolling out their vindictive austerity policies – punishing the poor and marginalized for the irresponsibility of bonus-bloated bankers –under the slogan «we are all in this together,» that Fisher helped me, as so many others, realize that in a certain sense many of us really were all in this together: united against the smug and deeply cynical moralizing of the «Nasty Party.» The battle to be waged concerned, as Fisher insisted, who that «we» was, who got to play a role in its construction and who got to speak in its name. This was a struggle to be fought across the subjective terrain of a population among whom depression and suicide were fast becoming endemic under pressure of a callous program of nationalized impoverishment. Whatever constituted that «we,» it certainly wasn't the ersatz imperialism of the Tory coalition government, which exported arms and *Downton Abbey* whilst imposing the bedroom tax and shitty zero-hour contracts in a bleak plague of Tesco Express outlets.

It was because of his great capacity to touch readers that Fisher's suicide in January 2017 – six months after Brexit and just days before the «American carnage» inauguration – felt like more than a personal tragedy, registering as an appalling symptom of a politics grown so toxic as to be unbearable. A tragedy all the more galling given that Fisher had been one of the most astute critics of the authoritarian tendencies and the vicious, petty nationalism nurtured within the smug edifice of twenty-first-century British neoliberalism, with its royal wedding kitsch, its film industry packed full of indistinguishable public school boys like so much posh potted meat, its sneering tabloids and condescendingly faux-chummy TV news, all soundtracked by the seemingly inescapable sedative sentimentality of Ed Sheeran and other lesser salesmen of the stodgy chug-a-long anthems that are stuffed onto the stages of Glastonbury like Sunday roasts.



Boris Johnson meets the public © Getty Images

In the spring and summer of 2015, Fisher had been on a high, energized by the Greek *Oxi* vote, the Labour leadership contest in the UK, and, strangely, even the return of the Tories to government earlier in the year, insisting that fissures in the old-boy order were palpable all across the cultural sphere and the official organs of hegemony were losing their grip on political messaging. Although the gathering forces of these counter-hegemonic tendencies were exhilarating in themselves, they didn't seem to support his almost messianic insistence that «summer was coming» and that a new political and cultural conjuncture was about to bloom from the long Tory winter. Those who knew Fisher personally or who had followed him over the years could sense that this high might be followed by a renewed low and one of his periodic withdrawals from writing and social media. Despite a readership eager to hear his searing takes on the Brexit campaigns and the referendum results, the fallout of the Tory and Labour leadership campaigns, the rise of Momentum and social media populism, the growing mainstream success of Grime MCs like Skepta and Stormzy, and of course the election of Trump, his silence persisted. There is now a hole where many of us had turned to find his empowering enthusiasm, his joyous polemic and the tenacity of his critical passions ready to buoy up our own.

Mourning continues, but at the risk of sounding trite, it seems that the best way to honor Fisher's legacy is to continue the necessary work of cultural criticism and collective capacity building that he contributed so to. This article is meant to serve as a brief introduction to some of his key concepts. I hope that it may prove a useful prompt for others to engage with his writing and to think about how his ideas, methods and passion might be taken up by others, elsewhere, and how the predatory inertia holding the creative energies and other worlds living among us hostage can be broken.

Culture as a Site of Struggle

Although he coined a number of striking and influential concepts, not least of these «capitalist realism,» it was in synthesizing others' ideas, grounding them in the grain of familiar

everyday contexts and weaponizing them from a passionately working-class perspective that Fisher worked most powerfully. At the theoretical level his writing was characterized by a work of bricolage that drew elements from disparate sources into a coherent composite of his own. Many of his methods and tropes owed a debt to the British tradition of Culture Studies, bearing particularly strong influences of Stuart Hall, Sadie Plant (his PhD supervisor), Kowdo Eshun, and Jeremy Gilbert (the latter two of whom he worked closely with on the 2016 edited collection, *Post-Punk Then and Now* and the 2013 pamphlet *Reclaim Modernity* respectively). His work likewise makes frequent reference to the early work of Slavoj Žižek, Fredric Jameson's seminal 1980s writings on postmodernism and more recent work by Franco ‹Bifo› Berardi on «semiocapital» and Jodi Dean on «communicative capitalism.»



Ed Sheeran gets a Knighthood © Getty Images

A common thread running through these lines of influence was the emphasis on pop cultural forms as crucial sites of political subjectification and hence as important objects for serious analytic attention. Cultural production, for Fisher, was a key site for the production of hegemony, with neoliberal capitalism along with its characteristic forms of economic structures, social relations and subjectivities being the dominant material and ideological structure characterizing the contemporary United Kingdom. Taking his cue from the

Lacanian-inflected insights of Jameson, Žižek, Dean and others, Fisher understood hegemony to operate not simply at the level of ideology, understood as a realm of ideas, concepts, epistemes, and outmoded discussions of false consciousness, but also, crucially, by producing and organizing desires. Hence in his thought the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism does not just rest upon dominant ideas of the way the world *is* and the manner in which people understand themselves within it – although these are important and need constant repetition in order to confirm their continued acceptance – but on the production of hopes, fears, expectations, resentments, antagonisms, and resignations. In other words, neoliberalism is an emotional apparatus that does not only seek only to control subjects from the outside but also to constitute them from the inside.

Psychic Politics

In Fisher's work, then, politics is understood to be fundamentally libidinal. In other words, the work of politics consists in producing and organizing desires. Hegemony is achieved for those forces that can most effectively shape people's libidinal investment in the social vision those said forces most benefit from. In capitalist societies, this means that guaranteeing support for, or at least resignation to, the organization of society around the requirements of markets and finance requires the full libidinal backing of the public. As the financial economy is restructured in response to systematic crises and the threat of organized opposition, the libidinal economies guaranteeing political support for the dominance of capitalist imperatives likewise require restructuring. Hence, for Fisher, the rise to dominance of neoliberalism in the U.K. since the 1980s, and particularly in the post-millennium years of militarized New Labour and Tory austerity, required a widespread campaign to rewire public desires in support of changes in economic policy and their social and cultural fallout. This requires, in turn, a new set of techniques and tools to rework political subjectivities in order to shore up hegemony around the economic restructuring of the UK, a program that included, but was not limited to, the breaking of organized labor, the privatization of public utilities, the cutting of public services including the provision of housing, the lop-sided focus of national economic policy on financial services, the cultivation of ersatz nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment as a means for displacing economic resentments, the promotion of increased consumer debt to guarantee spending despite stagnant wages and rising costs, the fomenting of neo-conservative attitudes to the role of the family in care provision, the cultural celebration of individualism and middle class «strivers» and the demonization of working class «chavs» or «scroungers,» as well as imperialist adventures to ‹police› the global borderlands where the national interest were seen to be at risk.

Political subjectivities are both the product and tool of ideological formations, the organizing nodes in the production and organization of libidinal economies and hence key instruments in the work of maintaining hegemony. Cultural production for Fisher is therefore not considered something of marginal importance within the political realm, but rather a key site of struggle where the fundamental building blocks of hegemonic formations are constructed and reconstructed. Cultural production in this sense is a libidinal battlefield where hegemony is contested and new possibilities for social relations, economic organization and political structures can be envisaged, legitimized, and realized.



David Cameron meets the public © BBC

Capitalist Realism

The peculiarity of neoliberal hegemony for Fisher is that it operates not so much by mobilizing libidinal investments in politics but rather by *delibidinizing* politics, by making politics a domain almost vacated of positive psychic attachments. This was the product of the contemporary ideological and cultural conditions that he referred to as «Capitalist Realism.» Capitalist realism, for Fisher, operates as the political unconscious of the present, a way of understanding the world so deeply embedded that we rarely even notice it exists or that we share in it. As such it operates as a sort of unquestioned and unquestionable common sense, resting on the assumption that there is no other way to organize social relations and the economy other than the status quo and hence no possibility of political transformation. Capitalism, for Fisher, has saturated our understanding of reality, almost becoming synonymous with it, so that most of the time we can't even imagine things being otherwise. In those rare instances when we can see the faint glimmer of other worlds, the supposedly hard-headed realism of capitalist realism brings us back to a stubborn cynicism that scoffs at the naiveté of those who believe in the possibility of any radical change. Hence, capitalist realism does not need to support the idea that capitalism provides the best way to organize society – indeed it is possible in many instances to acknowledge its limits and failures (see the inescapable, hackneyed resort to Winston Churchill quotations) – but simply that making radical social change is not possible or realistic. As such, capitalist realism, although productive insofar as it effectively guarantees the hegemony of neoliberal economic and

social relations and the political status quo, is a fundamentally negative psychic condition based on denying all other possible arrangements of existence, even as those existing may be acknowledged to be lacking. The concept is distilled most precisely for Fisher in the quote, often attributed to Frederic Jameson, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. The idea that capitalist social relations are an inherent part of human existence is now so deeply entrenched in our common sense imaginaries of the world that even species extinction cannot unseat it.



Everyday Fascism © The Sun

This fundamentally negative political unconscious, guaranteeing the delibidinization of politics, is both grounded in and produces, in turn, two profound losses in Fisher's view. The first is the loss of futurity, or rather the future as something open, defined by change, and hence the forward motion of progress towards better worlds. As Fisher notes, we may all now scoff at Francis Fukuyama's hubristic post-Cold War pronouncements about the «end of history,» but we all effectively accept the idea that no radical change is possible. The future as a horizon of change has been subsumed into an endless present, something that Fisher understood to be given symptomatic expression in the predominance of retro styles in music and the endless stream of remakes issuing from Hollywood. The second loss comes in the form of the loss of collectivity, of the sense that the individual was part of wider social groups and projects, particularly the loss of an idea of the working class as a collective with legitimate interests and a legitimate voice as a class. Here Fisher points to the importance of Margaret Thatcher's claim that «there is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families,» which serves as a sort of ideological bedrock for political culture even as many might shirk from the radicalism of the Iron Lady's rhetoric. Hence the campaign of individuation pursued by successive governments, that initially set to work on dismantling the power of collective labor, disrupting working-class communities by shuttering industries and rolling out «Right to Buy» schemes (which privatized social housing while buying political patronage from a new aspirational generation of voters at the expense of subsequent generations of working class communities who were liberated to participate in the housing market), is further naturalized with policies that punish the poor while introducing the imperatives of market competition into all dimensions of public service.

Political Depression

The ultimate effect of such a delibidinized politics and the culture of cynical individualism produced to guarantee it is, for Fisher, a widespread cultural and political depression. Indeed, at points he referred to a «depressive realism» that seemed almost synonymous with capitalist realism. If politics fundamentally involves libidinal economies, can the widespread rise of depression in the UK tell us something about the psycho-political state of the country? Fisher certainly thought it could. He argued that in the UK depression had reached epidemic proportions, and indeed both the Conservative and Labour parties are now discussing mental health as an urgent priority for national health services. However, in contrast to the discussion emanating from the Tory government Fisher argues that depression should not be understood as an individual state, a personal failing or illness, but rather as a social condition, a symptom of the psychic pressures generated by the demands of the economic system and the program of political and cultural delibidinization rolled out to support it. Hence depression is not simply a condition endemic to individuals but a collective condition, generated by economic and social relations. Crucial to Fisher, however, is that depression be understood not simply as a product of neoliberal hegemony but also a device in its service. Depression serves as a key tool of depoliticization, an affective dampening that saps the collective energies that would otherwise gather around demands for political change and better futures. Hence, depression is not only a symptom but also a technology of delibidinization, an effect of capitalist realism as well as a mechanism for its persistence.



Flooded Pub Leeds © BBC

Market Stalinism

As totalizing as Fisher's account of neoliberal hegemony under capitalist realism can appear, it is important to note that, in his account, hegemony is always an achievement, not a given. It is the product of continuous and concerted, if not centralized, efforts to deny the desire for collectivity and alternative futures, efforts undertaken by all manner of state institutions, media outlets, corporations, political parties, civil society bodies, think tanks, public figures, movies, pop music, etc. One of the most important sites within which this occurs is the workplace, and a key aspect of Fisher's work was an engagement with neoliberal cultures of work and management. In order to explore how exactly neoliberal hegemony operated and political subjectivities were formed, Fisher looked to the industry where he himself worked: UK higher education, arguably a key frontier in the spread of neoliberal governance not only within the UK but internationally, given the outsize global influence of the sector. Here he pointed to two simultaneous tendencies within the management of UK educational institutions to demonstrate how neoliberal techniques of governance help to produce political subjectivities that guarantee the hegemony of capitalist realism. On the one hand, there is an increase in the demands that management makes on workers within the higher education sector, particularly with regard to the growth of bureaucracy involved in providing education. Fisher recounts the particularly acute demands placed on workers in higher education through the constant demand for self-assessment that makes simple tasks much more laborious and time-consuming. Hence, although neoliberal reforms are legitimized through the claim to efficiency gains found in the cutting of red tape, the neoliberalization of the UK higher education sector has seen a mammoth growth of bureaucratization. Indeed, as Fisher argues, neoliberalization has not resulted in streamlined processes or less «dead wood,» but rather established new, self-perpetuating, strata of management to oversee the work of others (particularly those directly involved in the provision of learning). UK higher education is now characterized by what Fisher refers to as a sort of «market Stalinism» that has produced a rising tide of managerialism.

On the other hand, just as institutions have increased the demands they make on workers, they are increasingly withdrawing support and stability for those same workers. A lot has been written about neoliberalization and the accompanying rise in precarious labor conditions and this is what Fisher recounts from the UK higher education sector, where insecure, part-time, and temporary employment contracts become normalized. At the same time, an increasingly competitive atmosphere is encouraged by a reduction of resources, not least of which stable employment opportunities. Workers, already exhausted from the demands of pervasive management and self-assessment, find themselves working in progressively insecure and competitive environments: precarious conditions that produce anxious, fatigued, uncertain, and increasingly individuated subjects, lacking the energy, time, or sense of agency to engage in collective action around their working conditions. These two simultaneous tendencies – an increase in institutional demands and precarity – serve, in the context of UK higher education, to reproduce the anxious and individuated subjects that resign themselves to the depressive cynicism of capitalist realism.

The Joyful March through the Institutions

What is the proper response to the neoliberal takeover of institutions and the rise of managerialism? Is it, on the one hand, to retreat from institutions, whether to establish new institutional forms from the ground up, or to reject institutions altogether as inherently structured around disempowering hierarchies that restrict freedom, instead embrace immediacy and temporariness as the proper condition of a counter-hegemonic politics? Or rather, on the other hand, is it to reclaim institutions, particularly those nominally still public, from neoliberal managerialism and reorient their operations towards cultivating collective capacities for freedom and justice (as indeed many of them already claim to be their mission)? Fisher strongly advocated for the latter position and opposed the former, which he

characterized as a sort of neo-anarchist withdrawal that he associated with the Occupy Movement, at best ineffective and at worst complicit with the entrenchment of neoliberal hegemony, however unintentionally. A constant theme in his work was that the answer to the power of neoliberal hegemony was not to avoid hegemonic power *per se* but rather to seek to reclaim it for the Left and for new forms of popular modernism. In *Accelerate Management*, Fisher therefore argues that it is not management as such that should be rejected as inherently authoritarian and antithetical to Left causes, but specifically neoliberal managerialism, leaving the door open to alternative forms of management which serve progressive ends, where efficiency is not a byword for austerity but a labor-saving device that frees workers from excessive demands.

Fisher framed this idea of progressive, anti-managerial management in relation to accelerationism; at least to the minimal account of accelerationism that Fisher most frequently appealed to, which revolves around the possibility and desirability of reclaiming key elements of twentieth century modernism for the contemporary Left, notably a politics oriented towards a future that was maintained as an open horizon for new forms of collective experiment. This involved the use of technology, public institutions, and utilities to bring about a «better-managed society,» where ambitious programs of public welfare and infrastructure would reorganize work, time, and wealth, allowing greater time free of labor without requiring a loss of material wellbeing. These were themes that Fisher had explored in *Reclaim Modernity*, a pamphlet he co-authored with Jeremy Gilbert and published through Compass, a Left pressure group formerly associated with the Labour Party, in which they set out a vision for the renewal of progressive Left politics in the UK. This desire to return to the promise of modernity looked to the past, and particularly to «popular modernism,» the working-class cultural production in the post-war UK that, for Fisher, provided the material and cultural conditions for the emergence of working-class avant-gardes and the creative ambition of many that are increasingly being shut out of cultural production due to the neo-Victorian inequality of Tory Britain. This was no exercise in nostalgia, however. Nostalgia, for Fisher following Jameson, was absolutely central to the conditions of a neoliberal hegemony that could no longer generate positive images of future transformation but locked time in an endless loop of the present, in order to shore up a status quo which guaranteed stability and freedom for increasingly fewer numbers. Rather, reclaiming the progressive future-oriented perspective of post-war modernity would undo the libidinal erosion produced by the «slow cancellation of the future» witnessed under neoliberalism, allowing the emergence of collective actions towards a better society and hence acting as point of orientation for the renewal of progressive Left politics. Neoliberalism, in producing precarity, imposes an absolute contingency within the lives of most people, while denying the possibility of progressive change in the future. Reclaiming modernity for the Left would allow the contingencies that afflict everyday life under precarious labor conditions to be reduced while opening up the future once again as a space of possibility for progressive visions of social transformation. For Fischer, public institutions serve as key infrastructures / sites of struggle for the construction of such change and, as such, should not be abandoned but rather, like the future and modernity, reclaimed.



Theresa May Abbey Road

A Politics of Joy

Although a sharp critic of the supposed realism of capitalist realism, with its totalizing «no alternative» vision, Fisher himself often painted a bleak picture of neoliberal capitalism's almost all-encompassing, granular domination, not only in the *outer* sphere of economic policy, party politics, cultural production, and institutional management, but in the *inner* subjective sphere where our very desires have been colonized and restructured around forms of delibidinized resignation and competitive individualism. Yet while an engrained immiseration might have defined present conditions for Fisher, he militated against the idea that capitalist realism had achieved any sense of closure, always insisting on the possibilities for contestation and the spectral presence of other possible worlds submerged within the present. A fundamental axiom guiding his work was that the vast disciplinary edifice of capitalist realism is a reaction to collective passions it seeks to muffle and suppress, but which always remain a generative force capable of reanimation in radical emancipatory projects. If anything defined Fisher's work it was the attempt to preserve the radical creative potential

immanent to the social field, against the psychic onslaught of neoliberal deflation. While this often entailed detailing the depths of neoliberalism's everyday degradation, Fisher's focus was on the alterities immanent within a social field that capitalist realism presents as saturated by the status quo.

However, conducting such work itself involves a psychic struggle against the compounded weight of depressive realism, one that Fisher tragically could not himself sustain. It was precisely because of his acute awareness of the psychic toll of neoliberalism, born of a direct confrontation with depression, that Fisher consistently emphasized the importance of cultivating collective subjects and infrastructures. It was in keeping with his desire to maintain spaces for collective subjectification against the insidious dictates of capitalist realism that Fisher penned a provocative critique of what he called the «Vampire's Castle.» The «Vampire's Castle» was the name Fisher gave to what he saw as a moralizing regime of identity politics that had taken hold in aspects of academia. In Fisher's view, the ‹Vampire's Castle› militated against modes of collective subjectification, grounded as it was in a reductive account of identity that missed the central transversal dimension of class in structuring social power. This amplified the deflationary logics of neoliberalism, however unwittingly, by establishing an atmosphere of fear and self-doubt. The essay, published in 2013, proved contentious and sparked an online backlash, and a subsequent period of retreat from online writing from Fisher. Many will certainly find fault with some of the article's arguments – particularly its resonances with liberal, conservative critiques of ‹PC› in the ‹new culture wars› and a lack of self-reflexivity with regard to the situated nature of speech – and its sometimes bitter tenor arguably locates it within the same type of discursive score settling it set out to critique. Nevertheless, Fisher's core charge – that contemporary modes of debate among the academic Left at times work to diminish, rather than foster, capacities for collective subjectification – remains a timely if uncomfortable point. Fisher argued that in place of a censorious regime of moral self-fashioning, the Left needs infrastructures of collective subjectification and collective capacity-building that would allow politics to be rediscovered as a domain of possibility and indeed of joy, a space and process of collective liberty from the insidious, individuating binds of capitalist realism.



Strictly Ed Balls © Daily Mail

Acid Communism

Before his death, Fisher had been working on a new book called *Acid Communism*. Although the project was only in its early stages, some extracts from the unfinished manuscript were recently published as an open-ended conclusion of sorts to the *K-PUNK* collection. Here Fisher looked back to the explosion of psychedelic culture, social movements and labor militancy of the 1960s and 1970s in the US and Europe as a recent example of a time when a belief in people's collective capacity to realize freer worlds, and to do so joyously, was not

only widespread but even perhaps mainstream. In the experiments with democratic socialism, libertarian communism and popular avant-gardes that shaped the era, Fisher saw expressions of collective liberation that the deflationary culture of capitalist realism seeks to stymy. Indeed, much like Sylvia Wynter, Fisher identifies neoliberalism as an attempt to quell the threat posed to the established social order by the mobilization of social movements towards social equality and cultural freedom alongside a new brand of labor militancy that rejected the power of established unions. Rejecting the argument, associated with Luc Boltanski's and Eve Chiapello's account of the «new spirit of capitalism», that the social and cultural movements of the 1960s and 1970s laid the subjective foundations for the neoliberal revolution that followed, Fisher argues that neoliberalism and the culture of capitalist realism were a direct reaction to the real gains made by these movements. Neoliberalism set out precisely to deflate the growing sense of subjective convergence between different sites of struggle in opposition to capitalist social relations and economic imperatives, in the spheres of industrial and cultural production as well as on the streets and the airwaves. For a thinker who had long associated liberation with cultural forms grounded in experiences of alienation – particularly the inhuman post-industrial aesthetics of techno, house, and jungle music – Fisher's turn to the 1960s and 1970s, and the work of groups such as The Beatles and The Temptations, at first appears out of joint. Yet on closer examination *Acid Communism* is fully in keeping with Fisher's insistence that neoliberalism is a fundamentally reactive ideology which aims to undermine the capacities of collective subjects, and that the creative power to envisage and realize other, freeer and more just, worlds lies latent within mass cultural forms. For Fisher, it was in the 1960s and 1970s, with the intersectional flowering of social movements, cultural experimentation and radical workerism, that «the specter of a world which could be free» (as Herbert Marcuse wrote) was most potent, before the deflationary deluge of capitalist realism was loosed upon the world by the many organs of neoliberal reason. Fisher's point in returning to this period is not to peddle a narrative of decline nor adopt a stance of melancholy nostalgia with regard to all that was lost, but rather to reactivate the sense of the possible that, for him, is not a thing of the past, neatly ‹domesticated› in history, but rather lies buried alive in the present: buried due to the pernicious subjectivizing force of capitalist realism, yet alive because the «collective capacity to produce, care and enjoy» remains the generative force of social existence. *Acid Communism*, like much of Fisher's work, may tell a story of opportunities now lost and potential left unrealized, but it does so in order to illustrate that these losses were not the result of an inherent flaw in imagining the world otherwise, or constrains inherent to reality, but the product of a coherent but many-headed ideological program to crush the very notion of possibility itself. Fisher's counter-history allows the possibility of other – better – worlds to be stolen back from those who would deny them. *There are alternatives.*



UKIPs Nigel Farage crashes © The Telegraph

Re-Libidinizing the Left

Brexit, Trump, and the rise of the Far Right in recent years have underscored that the political fallout of capitalist realism can take the form not only of delibidinized inertia but also of an authoritarian re-libidinization. The dislocations that have accompanied neoliberalism have created the conditions for this resurgence of nationalist resentments. The strategy of major centrist parties, of both Left and Right, in the UK as in many parts of Europe, has been to shift steadily towards more extreme stances on immigration in order to win support on the Right while neutralizing demands for socio-economic reform coming from the Left. Hence, liberal parties in the UK and Europe have mainstreamed the anti-immigrant stance of the Far Right in order to shore up a failing economic status quo against the economic critique of the Left, displacing demands to address the economic fallout of neoliberalism onto the cultural terrain of immigration, in effect scapegoating those with migration backgrounds to save an economic system that is failing all. The same liberal politicians now have the audacity to feign surprise at the rise of «populism,» a term that conveniently equates the Far Right and Far Left, conflating Leftist critiques of neoliberal economics with the racist nationalism of the Right.

This strategy of displacing economic concerns into cultural resentments has had some success – –although the collapsing support for centrist parties of Left and Right across much of Europe shows how tenuous it has been — insofar as it has fed and fed off the resentments of those who see themselves as having been deprived of their historical privilege, whether economic or cultural, and who now seek the restoration of a supposedly golden era through the violent re-bordering of an imagined nation. The success with which economic concerns have been transposed into cultural anxieties perhaps finds no better expression than in those who insist that they would once again vote for Brexit even knowing the damage it will do to the UK because they want to «take back control,» of immigration above all.



Richard Spencer gets punched © The Verge

This ominous lurch to the Far Right that has seen nationalism, white supremacy, and fascism become mainstream, in other words, explicitly promoted rather than tacitly evoked, in democratic states like the UK, US and across Europe as well as in India, Brazil, and Russia, should give pause in thinking how best to respond to capitalist realism. How might the delibidinizing structures of capitalist realism be countered in a way that escapes the traps of such revanchist relibidinizations? How might the politics of the Left be relibidinized in ways that counter rather than replicate these tendencies within the contemporary conjuncture? Here I believe it is necessary to set Fisher's critique of the psychic politics of neoliberalism and the affective impact of capitalist realism in relation to other analytic traditions which can better account for the broader spectrum of ideological forces convulsing the neoliberal present. Fisher's acute observations of neoliberal culture need to be articulated alongside analyses of the other social forces acting within contemporary neoliberalism. These are forces entangled with, but in excess of, class power that he was perhaps not so acutely attuned to. It is important to follow Fisher in understanding neoliberalism as a counter-revolution against the acid communism of the 1960s and 1970s; it is just as important to center the structural role of

nationalism, racism, misogyny, and heteronormativity in shaping the particular characteristics of neoliberalism in any given context. Only in grasping the manner in which capitalist realism both feeds off and feeds into other ideological formations can the contours of neoliberalism be better observed and countered. This is not to replicate facile «class versus identity» binaries but to emphasize the need for a multivalent understanding of the ideological and material structures of neoliberalism's contemporary formations. The work of relibidinizing Left politics cannot be simply a dry exercise in analysis, but it is crucial in animating affects and mobilizing cultural forms to escape the narrow confines of older Left movements and allow the types of transversal resonances that Fisher identified in acid communism.

Yet for all this note of caution regarding the pathways opened for a relibidinization of Left politics, Fisher's work remains a vital reminder of the importance of joy in politics; indeed, a reminder that politics involves a work of collective subjectification that not only threatens domination but also promises liberation. Not just the liberation of individuals, but also the liberation *from* the individual as a fundamentally restrictive ideological construct that cuts us off from the joys of being more than one, of being together, of becoming together.

Mark is gone but we are still becoming with him.

[1] The Marxist political theorist Jodi Dean, another of Fisher's close comrades, gave the second annual lecture in January 2018, attracting in excess of 1000 people, many of whom listened in seven spill-over rooms.

RORY ROWAN

Rory Rowan is a political geographer and cultural critic. His research spans widely across critical social theory, human geography and the environmental humanities, and currently focuses on the political and philosophical dimensions of the Anthropocene, planetary governance and the emergence of resource extraction in outer space. He is co-author of On Schmitt and Space (Routledge, 2015) and regularly contributes writing on politics, art and cultural criticism to a number of print and online publications as well as working collaboratively with artists and curators. He is a Lecturer in Human Geography at Queen Mary, University of London and Guest Lecturer in the Masters of Fine Arts Program at the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK).

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