HOW DO YOU FIGHT A GHOST?

Way back in chapter 3, we briefly went over how capitalism is not grounded in concrete structures, but rather has become this evasive specter; it persists even in the way we think and interact. This system of value and production has melded into the exercise of government and in doing so, it converts everything it touches into an objective calculation of worth. Suddenly, *everything* becomes a part of “the market,” and *nothing* can survive without it.

The forces of capitalism elude most individuals because there never was any other alternative. This is an essential feature of capitalism—you have to rely on it to get by. Human rights like food, water, and housing were assigned a monetary value and suddenly, “Hey, we could save money by cutting this or that corner…” Because of just how much value is assigned to money and the subsequent comfort afforded by the accumulation of it, greed becomes baked into our way of living.

Democracy under capitalism allows the fatal compromise of cost versus benefit to plague its decision-making. The very act of governing becomes a perversion of ethics by allowing critical decisions to be made based on how much money it would cost. We learned from Camus that we humans aren't very good at learning from history, nor are we particularly good at thinking outside of ourselves, of the long-term. This is partially how we’ve allowed the climate crisis to get as bad as it is.

Naturally, rebellion is born out of the very hands of the oppressors. But this time, even action seems hopeless.12 Overthrowing the government is not a goal most Americans believe to be achievable, so the alternative is then to force the politics to change—via protest. The aim of protesting is not to challenge the system as a whole, but to “mitigate its worst excesses.”13 However, the sheer complexity of capitalism as we know it today means there are built-in redundancies at every corner—bureaucracy. To hash off the worst parts, you have to work from within, slashing your way through a jungle of other bullshit that's in the way of achieving that specific goal.

In scrambling what it means to achieve progress, opposition to capitalism is ideologically scattered. The amorphous blob that is capitalism consumes its opposition and makes it a part of its inner functions. Fisher claims that anti-capitalism can thrive within capitalist realism.14 By the way, “capitalist realism” is the acknowledgment of the underlying reality of capital and its functions, not just what it *seems like* or *ought to be*. The creation of anti-capitalism within capitalism seems paradoxical or oxymoronic, but Fisher’s example of this in action is the Disney film, *Wall-E*.15 In essence, the film captures the reality of capitalism in that it demonstrates the innate danger it poses to the survival and well-being of humanity, but any support of the film is not support of anti-capitalism, rather, it’s ultimately support for the Disney corporation. Supporting the film for its cute and penetratingly real message only supports the structures of reflexivity *within* the system. “Far from undermining capitalist realism, this gestural anti-capitalism actually reinforces it.”16 There is a proven incentive to appeal to anti-capitalist movements in the promise that there is a market for it. This is precisely why it is so hard to act against capitalism and why many of us have simply given up hope. So... if you can't beat the specter into submission, what can you do?

If capitalism is invulnerable to physical attacks, then maybe a blazing condemnation of its being will work... While hurling insults at a ghost is humorous to imagine, Fisher actually claims that, more than anything else, capitalist realism only has one weakness; *it's bad at its job*; “Capitalist realism can only be threatened if it is shown to be in some way inconsistent or untenable.”17 Easier summarized than put into action, I'm afraid... Think about a ghost—how do you go about trying to convince people to see the damage it's causing? It’s a ghost! Some people will see right through it and not even know it was there! This of course isn't a perfect analogy, but people’s perspectives are scattered and it's hard to get enough of them to realize what’s happening, especially if there are more and more factors that get involved. Fisher explains, “an ideological position can never be really successful until it is naturalized, and it cannot be naturalized while it is still thought of as a value rather than a fact.”18 Bernie Sanders’ presidential campaigns have opened people’s minds about the possibilities of better ways to handle the system, but it will never be successful unless enough people believe he's right. And so, rebellion against capitalism, to Fisher, is not a call to arms, it's an appeal to humanity.

The dependence on extrapolating the riches of the Earth and the resistance to do anything about the consequences it poses is something that angers my generation tremendously. Fisher poses 3 realities that expose the critical weaknesses of capitalism: environmental catastrophe, mental health, and bureaucracy.19 Environmental catastrophe is being realized in slow motion to us here on the ground. Especially in affluent countries, we have the potential to deal with changes in infrastructure and in prevention, so we don’t see the worst of what is already happening. Climate change exposes the greed at the base of our vast system of exchange. We can already see that “being green” has become a valuable marketing strategy and while more and more “responsible” companies are being born, the reliance on over-production still remains. Certainly, a great number of my generation are already aware that compromises will have to be made to our lifestyles since capitalism is perfectly willing to destroy the planet in order to please the market.20 You might argue that this is the fault of the government, but what exactly has the government been doing about this? Their interest is always and will forever be concerned with maintaining the stability of the market. Since the operations of capital have been absorbed into the functions of government, democratic services will always side with making sure that, however we respond, the primary goal is making sure that the health of “the economy” is not impeded—even as countless innocent people die day after day.

As the extent of the damage posed by environmental catastrophe grows, more and more of our youth are losing hope in their futures. The prophecy of societal collapse has been foretold and now all we can do is sit and wait for it to happen. This is one of many ways in which capitalist realism impacts mental health—in “treating [it] as if it were a natural fact, like weather.”21 Mental illnesses are an epidemic of systemic pressures and are fueled by the absurdity of our times. Fisher explains that by treating mental illness on a case-by-case basis, or “treating them as if they were caused only by chemical imbalances in the individuals’ neurology and/or by their family background,” the underlying root of “social systemic causation is ruled out.”22 Depression, anxiety, ADHD, etc. have been painted to seem like unfortunate toils of individual minds, but no one seems to be ready to challenge the assumption that the environment they’ve been forced to rely on has nothing to do with their ailment. We have become complacent with the gross system of neglect that ultimately forms and shapes our personalities and in allowing that, we essentially grant it access to untold future generations as well. The significant challenges our generation faces now is not a farce located in increased awareness and diagnoses—there is increasing evidence that social conditions may very well be the leading cause for mental illness.23 We are born into a world in which we are no more than a means to someone else’s end. Our happiness is supposedly guaranteed after a life of productivity and social usefulness, but actively dismissed until we get there... Yet we grow increasingly worried if retirement is even an option for our futures.

In the refusal to treat mental illness as a problem of systemic pressures, we forgo dealing with the root of the problem and instead have chosen to be complacent in the continuation of inflicting generations of damage. Mental health reveals the core tenant of capitalist realism, in abstracting the individual from the whole and insisting on individual points of origin for adverse behavior. In shifting focus away from itself, capitalist realism aims to condemn persons for faults they had no agency in developing.

Passion is pushed to the wayside as social pressures convince us to chase after the abstract idea of “power,” providing ourselves stability in making other men fear what you could achieve with the power you’ve fought for. This is baked into our lifestyles and our learned desires along the perversion of education in a world of increasing accessibility to a boundless source of knowledge. Education is a major factor in the early development of people’s lives and yet we allow it to abuse our children year after year. Nothing is more responsible to the poisoning of education in capitalist realism than through bureaucracy.

Bureaucracy, along with being infuriating to spell, is infuriating to deal with. The insistence upon the strict and non-negotiable categorization of anything and everything it touches has become an effective method of warding off authentic displays of individualism. Whether it be a technical support call center, redundant paperwork, or credit scores, bureaucracy is poised to present evidence of efficiency through the production of busy work designed to postpone and deter creativity or systemic change. The decentralization of bureaucracy has footed the bill away from the inefficiencies of the system itself onto the shoulders of innocent people so that wherever you look, there’s always a manager up the ranks to speak to instead.24 In the US, school curriculum is entirely based upon preparing students for an antiquated, ineffectual set of tests that determine a significant portion of your later life.25 This is bureaucratic bullshit at its finest, giving an illusory goal to fill an illusory need. Students know their test scores do not matter, teachers know their curriculums are whitewashed and unable to affect critical thinking. The bureaucracy of contemporary education leads students to become inattentive, uninspired, and uncritical of their surroundings. It reinforces the structures of capitalist realism, yet it remains such a glaring example of its inefficiencies to really get anything done. It is inefficient insofar that it educates simply on the basis of repetition and obedience. Action in its contemporary form has been made almost impossible to succeed. So what exactly are we acting for? On what principles and why?