



Essay: Philanthrocapitalism: Solidarity as a Commodity?
An attempt at a Marxist critique of concepts.
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1 Introduction

"The people have spoken. Trump will be allowed again.": With these freely translated words, the controversial tech entrepreneur Elon Musk announced in November 2022 the result of a vote on the Twitter platform he had acquired. The background: the account because of this unfounded allegations blocked former US President will only be unlocked under the patronage of the new Twitter owner if there is a majority on the platform. Regardless of the outcome of this poll, Musk is the clear winner: either because Trump is allowed in, giving the platform more free media exposure, or because supporters and opponents of the ex-president create new accounts to participate in the vote, increasing market value of the media company is also increasing. Whether Musk acted out of a fine democratic sentiment or it is a matter of a coolly calculated tactical maneuver is just as in the stars as the prospects of success of the Mars colony he praised. However, there is no doubt that the multi-billionaire, who is often stylized as a productivity guru and praised as a science fiction pioneer, is enjoying growing fascination with his appearances in the media. It is a recurring part of Musk's media strategy to legitimize parts of his actions and decisions through the supposed participation of society. In November 2021, he had a vote on Twitter whether he should sell some of his Tesla shares - the result was a sharp drop in prices. A year later, he also elegantly hands over responsibility for the fact that he, as a new employer, is making disproportionate demands to the Twitter staff: only those who confirm their new role as an obedient doorman by email are allowed to stay. However, there was no massive shitstorm, as would have been expected from other entrepreneurs - probably because the belief in the apparent do-gooder has become unshakable. The billionaire became a symbol of a democratic decision-making chain, and his fortune became a collectively awarded Order of Merit. However, the skeptical view raises the question of whether the faith outlined here actually results from the edifying effect of hyper-rich philanthropists, or whether it represents a coping strategy for society's powerlessness in the face of an apparently insurmountable hierarchy between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In this context, a dynamic is emerging that is supposedly capable of further legitimizing the inequality between the two classes. It operates under the term philanthrocapitalism, which "[...] is connoted as the philanthropy of very wealthy entrepreneurs [...] and associated with donor personalities [...]" (Sandberg 2014, 64). The Marxist perspective already indicated is shaken by a view of entrepreneurs as entities generating solidarity: if the philanthropy of the bourgeoisie is an effective concept for overcoming capitalist relations, the question arises whether the organization of the proletariat is still a necessity. The present essay is intended to pursue this problem and finally answer the question of whether the proletariat can, from a

Marxist point of view, hand over the philanthropic responsibility for a solidarity-based redistribution of wealth to actors of the bourgeoisie without hesitation. The thesis here is that the concept of philanthrocapitalism allows at most a superficial right of participation for the proletariat, its maintenance in the already mentioned definition serves to enforce a capitalist economic order.

2 Main part

2.1. Loss of importance of proletarian solidarity by capitalists as representatives of the interests of the proletariat within a capitalist hierarchyIt is

From a Marxist point of view, one characteristic of capitalism is the lack of workers' control over the wealth they create: maintaining the capitalist economic system can only be successful if workers create more wealth than they receive themselves. This logic is based on the assumption that a certain return on the wealth generated by the proletarians must go to the actors of the bourgeoisie, who, by exchanging money for labor power, have their assets work for them and thereby also increase them. (cf. Marx / Engels 1848, 13). The concept of making money work for you thus forms the obligatory core of capitalism. If the workforce were to have a say in the redistribution of wealth through effective solidarity on the part of the workers' collective, and the turning away from that concept, this would lead to an immediate change in the economic system, after which it would no longer be called capitalism. The concept of a functional application of solidarity thus seems difficult to grasp within the framework of a capitalist economic order.

The mechanism of action of what is in the neoliberal sense can be connoted as the most obvious surrogate for solidarity, should be outlined using the following example: The workers come together in a warehouse to fight for a better working atmosphere and higher wages. After negotiations with the employer, who explained that a wage increase would mean job cuts, an agreement was reached to set up a table football game in the break room. In return, the demand for higher wages is dropped, because of course nobody wants to be fired.

The workers leave the office strengthened in their self-efficacy and go to work efficiently. In fact, however, nothing changes in the role of the proletarians, whose right to co-determination was only used in appearance: The employees have the feeling that the employer takes them and their requests seriously. However, it is hardly they themselves who exercise control over the equipment of the business premises at their workplace. Rather, the

employer, out of interest in increasing efficiency, follows the standards of occupational psychology in order to compare the costs of a piece of gaming equipment against the financial advantages of a better one in a statistically sound manner. Tuned personnel who, in the event of resentment, could cause problems or initiate a strike. Without knowing it, the workers are not perceived in their role as human beings, but are reduced by the bourgeoisie to their role as a productive force and a commodity. From the perspective of Marx and Engels, the sellers of their own labor power alienate themselves from themselves in this way, since they do not determine the working conditions of their guild themselves, but are regarded by the capitalists as a commodity and managed accordingly (cf. Marx / Engels 1848, 6). The solidarity surrogate in the form of a toy, which was enforced under the collective economic pressure of the half-heartedly organized workforce, does not change the concentration of power among the capitalists: Solidarity within the framework of the proletariat remains largely unsuccessful. The bourgeoisie, on the other hand, does not act in solidarity at all, but simply chooses the best available measure to protect its capital. Under the conditions described, the impossibility of the workers' collective dominating the rule of wage dependence seems just as obvious as the lack of interest on the part of the bourgeoisie in a redistribution of wealth.

2.2 The improbability of solidarity in philanthrocapitalist structures

Philanthrocapitalism promises enabling one truthful Solidarity, which not only necessarily and superficially correspond to current social values and norms enough. After all, according to the credo, it must be the natural responsibility of the capitalists to ensure more social justice through their position of power. In contrast to the apparently original capitalism, it is assumed here that the capitalists show solidarity with those from whose accumulated labor power they enrich themselves out of a completely intrinsic compassion. The role of the kindhearted savior is ascribed to the capitalist, who not only shares his fortune at the request of his staff, but also his earnings without return to the proletariat in selected institutions such as developing countries leaves. The recognizable demand of the representatives of philanthrocapitalism is to declare the implementation of solidarity solely the task of the capitalists. A departure from capitalist principles would not be necessary according to this view.

An essential component combines the two approaches: Both in traditional capitalism and in its supposed further development, solidarity does not happen through the rule of the

proletariat, which self-determinedly administers the added value produced by its work. While this fact seems obvious and self-evident in traditional capitalism, philanthro-capitalism masks that power imbalance by pretending that capitalists are democratically legitimate and charitable representatives of society. At the same time, philanthrocapitalism posits that the solidarity of capitalists towards the proletariat is the product of social cohesion between both classes.

However, the interest in economic production that is inevitably inherent in capitalists stands in direct contradiction with a solidarity against that class which sells its labor power for the benefit of the capitalists. However, an essential prerequisite for solidarity is the representation of common goals. Just as the solidarity of the cattle breeders towards their animals cannot lead to the abolition of the use of cattle, so also a solidarity of the capitalists towards the proletariat will remain fruitless. A rudimentary form of solidarity could only develop if the workers' collective decided how the income of capitalist actors should be distributed - which raises the question of whether, if such a project were successful, one could still speak of the economic order of capitalism.

2.3 The irrationality of philanthropy from a market economy perspective

The above point explains why effective solidarity in a capitalist economic order cannot be constituted through the influence of the bourgeoisie. However, the question remains open as to why philanthro-capitalism allows the bourgeoisie to pass on the surplus value generated by the proletariat to selected components of the proletariat at all, which is not achieved through coercion by the united workers' power. If the bourgeoisie makes decisions with which it counteracts its interest in profit, then capitalism would have to abolish itself, since the concentration of wealth in the domain of the rulers of the means of production is an essential feature of capitalism (cf. Marx / Engels 1848, 4). Paradoxically, the social commitment of companies seems to have asserted itself as a success factor in recent years: the terms sustainability and fairness - especially with regard to working conditions - are no longer "nice extras" but have become an integral part of the image of numerous companies further developed. Regardless of their authenticity, the promises are evidence of a growing rejection of consumers towards conventional production methods. In this context, a competitive advantage based on consumer sovereignty is decisive for the change of mind of the market. The charitable character of companies thus became a market economy necessity.

In order to be able to assess the consequences of this approach for the actions of the so-called philanthrocapitalists, it must be examined whether it actually does justice to the purely idealistic standard of philanthropy, or whether it allows conclusions to be drawn about mechanisms that lie beyond instinctive mercy. The contrast between the selfish-sounding word "competitive advantage" and the euphonious term "philanthropy" suggests that the inexperienced use of the term "philanthrocapitalism" leads to a shift in discussion in favor of capitalist actors: through a philanthropic reform, so the view of the proponents of the term that capitalism could be further developed into an economic order in which charity embodies a dynamic of its own that is just as self-evident as the capitalists' pursuit of profit (cf. Sandberg 2014, 73f). Since the product of "donations" advertised under the slogan of solidarity is already seen as something unmistakably good in the context of consumption-oriented philanthropy, there is hardly any social reflection on the question of the consequences of such transactions (cf. Li 2017, 459).

The symbolically generalized commodification of donation turns the proletarian recipients of aid into popular commodities, making it the only acceptable method of eliminating inequality in the sense of capitalism (cf. *ibid.*). From this conclusion, the proletariat consumes charity products and donation certificates, assuming that the bourgeoisie will do the same. It is initially obvious within the framework of capitalist logic that an apparently voluntary redistribution of wealth cannot take place in a completely selfless manner. In order to mobilize resources for supposedly charitable purposes, entrepreneurs fall back on money that they have previously saved elsewhere. However, this saving cannot be traced back to a random increase in productivity or similar seemingly random events. Rather, the saving is subject to the calculus of the entrepreneur, whose employees always produce more wealth for the company than they receive for themselves. It is therefore always connected with production at the expense of the employees and initially means nothing more than the withholding of a higher share of the profits.

Furthermore, the hierarchy between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat not only takes place within companies, but is also reflected in the interaction of state actors. The wealth generated by workers in western countries is passed on to marginalized producing countries in exchange for goods manufactured there. Here it is important to remember that the producing countries in the capitalist economic system always take on the task of undercutting the production costs in the respective consumer nations. In this episode they are encouraged to produce more wealth than they receive for their own livelihood. As a result of this dynamic, additional subsidization by the consumer nations can never result in the producing countries having more resources at their disposal than they have used for

their production. Here, too, philanthro-capitalism promises to solve this problem solely through the credo of voluntary charity by private-sector actors. However, this voluntary nature harbors a risk: if responsibility for philanthropy is placed at the discretion of capitalists instead of being enshrined in a constitution, this leads to questionable reliability of the system in the event of an economic crisis. The automatic reinterpretation of donations from company-related foundations to philanthropy also means that the function of those transactions is not further reflected. Here, too, it is important to consider that the foundations set up for this purpose, which “[...] are perceived as apolitical, although they influence political decisions [...]” (Sandberg 2014, 72) under the proviso proceed with a market economy calculation. The example of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation shows, for example, that donations to developing countries can be used to obtain permission for gene experiments in return for the money paid, which are prohibited by law in the West (cf. Renaud 2022). Here, too, it is likely that the decision to donate was not based on a social compass of values, but rather in the interests of the shareholders of the companies benefiting from the relevant legislation - in this case Bill Gates - (cf. *ibid.*).

3 Summary and outlook

In the sense of the commodification of solidarity practiced by the bourgeoisie, Li (2017) shows that the wage-earning class now also feels compelled to express their desire for recognition by purchasing charitable products. Through the commodification of donations resulting from the concept of philanthrocapitalism, the bourgeoisie of the dominant companies generate a higher return for two reasons: First, through the consumption-promoting fusion of purchase purpose and supposed philanthropy, secondly, through the strategic use of donations as investments, which it The lack of alternatives in capitalism should not be questioned.

The critique of the concept of philanthrocapitalism is part of the critique of various approaches to justifying a capitalist distribution of wealth. Like the idea of an “invisible hand” according to Adam Smith or his “trickle-down theory”, philanthrocapitalism only superficially represents a surrogate for a just, collectively decided redistribution of wealth. The motivation and sustainability of the philanthrocapitalist approach are questionable insofar as the bourgeoisie claims the concept of philanthropy for itself, thereby alienating it from its actual meaning and making it an advertising tool for the ruling class. It can be assumed that a sustainable redistribution of wealth can only take place through

market-independent interests - provided these represent the value of philanthropy in the original sense.

4 Postscript

In the context of the present essay, the critique of the term is primarily aimed at dealing too lightly with the assumption that capitalism solve its problems of its own accord. We are dealing here with a dynamic that is suitable for presenting the constant reflection on the given conditions – as demanded by Marx – as dispensable. That dynamic is already manifest as actors of capitalism are proclaiming the end of public debate because philanthro-capitalism seems to contain all the solutions. The criticism of those circumstances is by no means to be understood as a pure criticism of the existing system, but as a presentation of a new challenge and thus also as a criticism of the practical implementation of socialist components ("*The reform*") into the given system in order to change it. In this context, it would have been necessary to present this line of thought in a more comprehensible manner.

In the spirit of criticizing the existing system from within, I have dispensed with a more detailed analysis of the question of whether and how overcoming the economic order within the framework of possible cooperation with the bourgeoisie is possible and expedient - the pitfalls of this concept to be clarified would be precisely those , which I have addressed in this essay.

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Please note: All literal quotes in this essay have been translated from their original versions in German, coming from the literature listed below. Since the translation was made automatically, the translations might not be accurate.

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