Capitalism in Philosophical Posthumanism

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Introduction

Francesca Ferrando's *Philosophical Posthumanism* offers a monumental contribution to the scholarly, teaching, and practitioner worlds. It spans multiple dimensions of posthumanism and integrates them into a compelling account of this invigorating shift in theory and praxis. The book has value for scholars, teachers, and newcomers of/to the posthuman r/evolution(s) thanks to its prodigious scope and insightful analyses. I believe it should be a top consideration in any reading list for a serious course of study on posthumanism. In what follows, I will offer comments to inspire ongoing engagement with this potent text, intervening from my own background in business ethics and political economy.

Reading Ferrando's *Philosophical Posthumanism* immediately brought up questions for me about the political-economic context in which the philosophical shift towards posthumanism proceeds. The text did not tend to attend to the economic levels of reality, and I wonder about how such levels intersect with, amplify, propel, suppress, or hinder aspects of the posthuman turn. Related questions have been posed about transhumanism (Lemmens, 2015, 182) and they may be even more germane to posthumanism, as the latter appears less invested in and more critical of free market ideologies. Political turmoil and polarization in countries like the United States point to a crisis in capitalism as a prevailing ideology. The neoliberal order has come under attack from both the populist right and the progressive left. Despite these seismic shifts, powerful business interests remain vested in reinstating neoliberal global capitalism (Seib, 2021). How can the moves of Ferrando's text be supported by more robust critique of capitalism?

While Ferrando does not take up the problem of capitalism as an explicit object of analysis in *Philosophical Posthumanism*, it is clear from a number of remarks that she is sympathetic with a project critical of neoliberal capitalism. Let me note a few textual instances of such a sympathy. In doing so, I shall pose questions in the spirit of inviting additional trajectories for research. I aim to facilitate further unfolding of Ferrando's work by recommending additional touch points for posthuman research that intersect with political-economic registers.

Posthumanism must be differentiated from transhumanism, especially in its libertarian guise. Ferrando traces the genealogy of transhumanism to the Enlightenment's preoccupation with reason and progress, finding these concepts problematic for their exclusivism and simplicity; for example, technology carries regressive potential, especially in warfare applications

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(Ferrando, 2020, 33-34). The libertarian and democratic variants of transhumanism could likewise be traced to liberalism as it developed during the Enlightenment, given the preoccupations with freedom, liberty, and autonomy. Ferrando critiques the morphological freedom advanced by transhumanists in their technohuman enhancement aspirations for its dualism (as with the scheme to upload minds to computers). What notions of freedom are at work in various versions of posthumanism and how do these overlap with or depart from transhumanism?

I would be interested to hear more about how Ferrando views the conceptions of political freedom and economic freedom at play in classical liberalism and neoliberalism as these notions bear on the divergences and convergences between transhumanism and posthumanism. It would be especially interesting to consider such questions in relation to the human enhancement chapter (discussed in Kevin LaGrandeur's commentary) and the convergences between democratic transhumanism and speculative posthumanism (Ferrando, 2020, 138). Liberalism, particularly in its libertarian and neoliberal iterations, presumes an individualistic anthropology that is certainly anathema to posthumanism. I'd be curious to hear about the degree of compatibility between posthumanism and other versions of liberalism. For example, posthumanism may gel best with egalitarian versions of liberalism that recognize restraints on negative liberties and elevate positive liberties, whereby the individual's freedom is regarded as embedded in systems and structures. If philosophical posthumanism is a post-humanism, post-anthropocentrism, and post-dualism (Ferrando, 2020, 54) it would seem that individualizing, isolating, atomizing, or totalizing conceptions of freedom could be problematic. Rather than freedom-from or freedom-to, notions of freedom-with and freedom-towards may congeal beautifully with posthumanism. Systems of political economy that foster a pluralistic ethos, such as Walzer's "spheres of justice" or even Bruni and Zamagni's rehabilitation of the civil economy tradition offer congenial frameworks for posthumanism. And how about compatibility with other traditions, such as republicanism, communitarianism, Marxism, anarchism, etc.?

Focusing on capitalism, let us zoom in on economic freedoms as they intersect with posthumanism. Eco-technologies could be a place to begin to assess market-based conceptions of freedom from a posthuman vantage point. In a chapter on "Posthuman Technologies as Ways of Revealing", Ferrando reflects on the adverse health effects of computer use, based on their existing designs. (Although this book was written long before the COVID-19 crisis struck, such adverse impacts are something we can surely all relate to now!) She emphasizes that "technology per se is full of potentiality" and creatively considers various ecologically and somatically healthy alternative designs (Ferrando, 2020, 43). In this regard, Ferrando's thoughts on Marchesini, whom she references several times in the book, merit further consideration. According to Umbrello's review of a recent book, Marchesini provides a compelling re-conceptualization of the meaning of techné for our posthuman futures (Umbrello, 2019). I'd like to note that the neoliberal context serves to explain why the potentials and designs Ferrando favors either don't exist or are not prevalent: they don't easily advance the profit motive.

In the chapter on "Artificial Life", she likewise suggests that: "In the era of the Anthropocene, technology should be rethought as 'eco-technology'" (Ferrando, 2020, 118). Eco-technologies include biomimicry, cradle-to-cradle design, zero waste, upcycling, and so on (Anderson & White, 2011; Hawken, 2010, 2021; Farnsworth, 2020; McDonough & Braungart, 2002, 2013).

Bioplastic is a common example of a successfully designed and implemented eco-technology. Some advocates of ecological approaches to technology call on voluntary adoption by businesses rather than government regulations to innovate, develop, and produce these technologies, arguing that market processes can engender their widespread dissemination. Others call for varying degrees of government involvement, such as regulations, incentives, and subsidization. Arguments for such responsible eco-innovation can be made in ways that coincide with posthuman discourse, emphasizing the radical interdependence of companies, stakeholders, and systems in ways that complexify the meaning of economic rational self-interest. The economic self can be viewed as spatially and temporally embedded in relationships that interconnect globally and with long-term commitments potentially spanning generations. The notion of the "self" as an economic actor may be radically extended via stakeholder analysis, systems theory, or expanded time horizons. Can market-driven approaches to eco-technology be posthuman, and, conversely, how would posthumanism critique the market context in which eco-technologies get developed? Would posthumanism tend to favor greater government involvement to fully operationalize and institutionalize eco-infrastructures and eco-technology development? In other words, are the pro-market arguments and perspectives even compatible with posthumanism?

Ferrando explores AI and Robotics in the chapters Posthuman Life and Artificial Life, often with an eye to the problem of "othering" robots or subsuming them under expectations of human knowledge or abilities. Drawing on N. Katherine Hayles, she emphasizes the importance of embodiment and the biological turn in AI, while showing how posthumanism distances itself from a "univocal" approach to technology that would center the machine or the so-called living organism (Ferrando, 2020, 116-119). I want again to draw our attention to the political-economic backdrop against which the AI and robotics projects unfold. An idea that recurs in various forms in the studies of technology ethics is that technical means can amplify existing socio-cultural-political-economic-environmental structures. Such amplifications can then feedback further, altering these structures in possibly deeply troubling ways, so contra the "neutrality thesis", technology is never just a means. Who gets the resources to design and for what purpose influences the direction in which such technology evolves, suiting the interests of some at the expense of others.

Let me briefly mention several examples that pursue this line of approach to evaluating the interplay between technologies and capitalism. Atanasoski and Vora argue in *Surrogate Humanity* that robots become surrogates for humans in the ways oppressed peoples have been subservient to white European males. They characterize the context of robotics development as "technoliberal capitalism", which is also tied to patriarchy, racism, and settler colonialism (Atanasoski & Vora, 2019, 59). This context limits the imagination, closing off its sense of futurity to the goals of designing robots that merely replace the docile, seemingly happy domestic servant or slave. The idea that settler colonial patriarchal capitalism limits the sense of future possibilities has been developed in a number of critical race and postcolonial theories. For example, Suárez-Krabbe (2015) argues that this system "incarcerates the future", blocking the imagination of emancipatory alternatives. More recently, Zuboff has developed related critiques about AI in her influential work on "Surveillance Capitalism", which she considers to be capitalism gone "rogue" (Zuboff, 2019). Capitalist sponsored AI feeds back on the system and mutates capitalism in potentially tyrannical ways that deepen inequality and oppression and depose democracy.

Ferrando's chapter on "Almost, Human" deals with the transatlantic slave trade and genocide (as well as witch hunts and freak shows) to show how "Othered" groups get used to constitute the human in a dynamic of dehumanizing "others" to humanize those who've centered themselves. I'd like to add the frame of racial capitalism to this analysis. Exclusivist humanizing projects have always been tied to empire and its economic interests. There is a trajectory connecting Cicero's justification of Rome's civilizing educational humanizations and modern European imperialism in its contemporary American manifestation. Chattel slavery, land theft and indigenous genocide were all bound up with the formation and expansion of capitalism with its rapacious exploitations, expropriations, and exterminations. To rationalize getting rich through violence, abuse, slavery and murder, dehumanizing ideologies had to be constructed by/for these criminal adventurers. Moreover, the idea that humans could own the land or have property rights in the Earth reinforced the ideologies that dehumanized non-European peoples. An intellectual architecture of property and profit furnishes infrastructural support for forced labor and the primacy of things over people/living beings and wealth over welfare. In short, racial capitalism is intimately bound to the dehumanizing/humanizing dynamic considered in this chapter.

The above considerations could also be connected to Ferrando's treatment of the Anthropocene. There she references various reframings of the Anthropocene to reflect the way some humans and systems have generated eco-crises, such as Moore's notion of "Capitalocene" or Haraway's idea of "Plantationocene". These reframings are interpreted as necessitating a post-anthropocentric paradigm shift (Ferrando, 2020, 105), which seems reasonable, but more needs to be done to unpack the problems of racial capitalism as it pertains to ecological devastation in order to move beyond existing realities towards these inspirational visions. Frameworks from environmental justice and spatial justice literatures in geography, anthropology, sociology, and political theory could facilitate such a research path.

To that end, further engagement with Vandana Shiva could prove invaluable, as well as the claim, following Rosi Braidotti, that capitalism's contemporary phase is perversely post-anthropocentric (Ferrando, 2020, 122-123). Shiva's call for Earth Rights marks an important pragmatic orientation towards corporate capitalism's "war on the Earth" (Shiva, 2013), and merits thorough elaboration in relation to posthumanism, especially in the orientation towards perspectives from the Global South and indigeneity. Ferrando notes that: "the biological act of hybridizing, which Shiva relates to genetic engineering and GMOs, is not neutral, but is tied to political and economic powers, which leaves the capitalist patriarchal paradigm intact by benefitting specific corporations and interests" (Ferrando, 2020, 123).

However, Ferrando suggests that Shiva's notion of "Earth Democracy" is not entirely compatible with posthumanism because of its articulation of "ecological identities", which risks a form of essentialism and potential dualism. Ferrando leans more towards Donna Haraway's conception of "affinity", viewing Shiva's alleged non-compatibility with posthumanism in terms of the strategic value of the concept (Ferrando, 2020, 152-154). While Ferrando stresses the post-dualistic aspect of posthumanism, against her interpretation of Shiva, I note that Shiva herself seems to regard her work as non-dualistic, indicating, for instance that a transformation towards a peaceful relationship with the Earth firstly requires moving beyond a "Cartesian-mechanistic paradigm" (Shiva, 2013, 265). Moreover, the science of ecology is inherently relational. It would seem that Shiva's concerns about ecological identities are mainly meant to resist biopiracy, bioprospecting, and biotech genetic

engineering, as Ferrando acknowledges. A reconsideration of compatibilities between posthumanism and Earth Democracy could serve to articulate clearer views on political-economy in support of the key moves of *Philosophical Posthumanism*.

Following Braidotti, Ferrando draws our attention to the complex corporate interests in technological manipulation of nature through genetic engineering to advance the interests of powerful parties. She characterizes advanced capitalism as "perversely anthropocentric". I'd like to discuss further Braidotti's discussion of this topic. Braidotti emphasizes the commodification of life under neoliberal capitalism, pointing out that it "actively produces differences for the sake of commodification" (Braidotti, 2013, 58-59). She emphasizes its "techno-scientific structure" which seems to facilitate these divisions for the purposes of commodifying life. It would seem that the production of diversity also involves "blurring the distinctions" and dissolving boundaries or "lines of demarcation" between humans and other life forms as well as other binaries, and in that sense is post-anthropocentric (Braidotti, 2013, 63-64). However, Braidotti describes the "perverse" aspect of this post-anthropocentrism as "not necessarily or automatically post-humanistic" (Braidotti, 2013, 65); the perverse part of humanism would seem to derive from the exploitative, profit driven purposes of such boundary dissolution. Braidotti points to the "pan-human bond of vulnerability" as a "negative" outcome of these capitalistic processes, but also suggests the possibility of "alliances" with all life in a "vital materialism" (Braidotti, 2013, 65-66). Ferrando likewise insightfully notices when capitalist assumptions creep into scientific models, such as when she critiques Tegmark's assumptions about wastefulness in his model of the multiverse (Ferrando, 2020, 174).

Braidotti in Posthuman Knowledge (2019) takes up the inter-dynamic relationship between posthumanism and capitalism in more depth, devoting considerable critique to neoliberal governmentality and forms of "advanced" capitalism like "cognitive capitalism". Locating the "posthuman convergence" in these conditions she invites us to consider "new forms of democratic participation by humans as well as nonhumans" (Braidotti, 2019, 94). Against theoretical approaches that tend to limit freedom via overemphasis on deterministic apparatuses operating at macro-structural levels (Braidotti, 2019, 95, 172), she looks to new potentialities for becoming posthuman subjects, where freedom is to be found. "Ethically, vital neo-materialist subjects are animated by the positivity of an ontological desire that orients them towards the freedom to express all they are capable of becoming" (Braidotti, 2019, 155). This sort of freedom is couched in an "affirmative ethics" and is not to be assimilated to neoliberal individualistic achievement (Braidotti, 2019, 176). "Affirmative ethics builds on radical relationality, aiming at empowerment" (Braidotti, 2019, 166). She sees posthumanism as potentially "rekindling the collective desire for democracy" in the face of "democracy fatigue" (Braidotti, 2019, 34-39, 178). While these suggestions do not often come with concrete or pragmatic proposals, they help orient as towards answers to some of the questions I have posed about Ferrando's *Philosophical Posthumanism*.

Finally, I'd like to invite further reflection on Foucauldian biopolitics regarding neoliberalism as well as consideration of necropolitics in the footsteps of Braidotti. Ferrando looks to Foucault's notion of "technologies of the self" to find possible (re)sources for the "outsiders of the hegemonic notion of the human" (Ferrando, 2020, 82). She points out that Foucault theorizes technology by differentiating technologies of production, signs, power, and the self. It would be illuminating for Ferrando to delve into this "starting point" (Ferrando, 2020, 83)

in relation to neoliberalism. Aren't technologies of the self too individualistic for posthumanism? Relatedly, how does biopolitics figure in this account of philosophical posthumanism? What other lessons can we learn from Agamben, his andro- and Eurocentrism notwithstanding? How about Hardt and Negri's model? Or what about Mbembe's theory of necropolitics, which Braidotti also takes up? As Braidotti suggests in her analysis of necropolitics, there is an inhuman element of post-anthropocentric capitalism (Braidotti, 2013, 122-130). I find myself wondering about the advantages of a posthuman critique of necrocapitalism versus a critique focusing on its inhumanity.

In closing, I want to thank Francesca Ferrando for writing this integrative, illuminating, and inspiring text. *Philosophical Posthumanism* offers bountiful contributions to future scholarship with its plentiful and panoramic incorporation of multiple vantage points. In this commentary I have merely sought to expand just one of the lenses that had appeared in the margins of its otherwise comprehensive sweep. In keeping with some core insights of posthumanism, such marginal notes are certainly apt, as no text can or should be totalizing in its reach. Ferrando has gathered the resources and blessings needed for continuing to imagine healthful and hopeful alternative posthumanisms for our times. As Braidotti mentions in her forward to the book: "Although Ferrando is very aware of the inhuman(e) aspects of our technologically advanced historical condition… she stresses the importance of solidarity, empathy, and ultimately love" (Ferrando, 2020, xv).

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