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Handmaidens to Capitalism

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Although I wholeheartedly agree with Gloss, Carr, Reichman, Abdul-Nasiru, and Oestereich (2017) that a focus on those living in the deepest forms of poverty is sorely needed in industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology, the real issue is not so much who we serve but *how* we serve, and specifically how we continue to neglect the systemic failures of capitalism at the root of poverty. Ultimately, it is this global market system that determines not only the distribution of wealth but also how wealth is often achieved at the expense of another's poverty. Moreover, it is this system that constrains and undermines capabilities. For these reasons, I am skeptical of the authors' proposal for mitigating the pervasive POSH bias in our field, especially because this bias seems premised on a pervasive neglect of capitalism the authors fail to fully address.

A Historic Neglect

To better grasp the pervasive neglect of capitalism in I-O psychology, we would do well to revisit the field's history. Prior to I-O psychology's emergence at the turn of the 20th century, the preceding half century of rapid

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industrialization in America and Western Europe had left in its wake a toxic mix of unsafe working conditions, social displacement, and decreased job security. The notoriously unsuccessful "drive system" popular at the time consisted of little more than "abuse, profanity, and threats" reinforced by a "fear of unemployment to ensure obedience" (Jacoby, 2004, pp. 15–16). Unsurprisingly, workers retaliated against this primitive form of management by restricting output, boycotting, and rioting. Businesses countered with tactics of their own, hiring arsenals of armed guards, strikebreakers, and private militia to fuel a vicious cycle of animosity that would eventually escalate to the highest echelons of political power. Calls to fundamentally restructure society could be heard from not just management and labor, but from all sectors of society—from scientists and social reformers to policy makers and religious leaders. In addition to an employment system in tatters, the traditional work ethic of preindustrial capitalism had seemingly run its course (Rodgers, 1974).

Social scientists, more than any other group, seized upon this opportunity. Emboldened by the hope of finding technical and administrative solutions to society's social and political problems, the world's first I-O psychologists introduced captivating work schemes, but they did so at the expense of downplaying the deeper adversarial conditions of labor relations. Moreover, science would provide the excuse to avoid these conditions, because as "psychotechnician" and "mental engineer," the I-O psychologist "has no right to decide which effect is good and which effect is bad" (Munsterberg, 1915, p. 182). The fundamental flaw here, clear as day in retrospect, was that value neutrality was not only impossible—even "pure" psychology has values (Howard, 1985; Kaplan, 1964)—but deeply compromising. It pulled I-O psychology into the bosom of the managerial elite (Baritz, 1960).

This is the backstory to the derisive label of "handmaiden" coined by Baritz (1960) and used by Gloss et al. (2017) to situate their case for capabilities. But what Gloss et al. seem to overlook in reading this history is the humanist ethos at its core. For as Munsterberg (1915) notes, this same "mental engineer," wedded to the sanctity of science, must also believe unquestionably in the "overflowing joy and perfect inner harmony" that I-O psychology would bring to society, ushering in a "cultural gain … to the total economic life of the nation" (p. 309). The point here is that even our ancestral "handmaidens" were driven by humanist if not humanitarian concerns—without them, there would be no I-O psychology—but more so, these concerns served a purpose: to obfuscate the struggles for power and recognition at the heart of work. Put simply, the marriage of science and humanism ingrained in the inception of our field effectively depoliticized capitalist work relations. There is little indication we have awoken to this fact.

The Complicity of Capabilities

If the above history is any indication, capabilities are only as good as the system they reside in. As Marx (1844) noted over a century and a half ago, the need for self-determination—a key priority of the capability approach—is antithetical to the alienating quality of wage work under capitalism. Subsequent scholars have gone on to reveal how capitalist organizations necessarily rely on a labor force that is simultaneously dependable and disposable (Hyman, 1987)—a fact that effectively cripples capabilities. Although the authors might concede these points (insofar as they acknowledge both the socio-structural and psychological dimensions to capabilities), what they risk ignoring is how the capability approach potentially serves as the latest form of normative control (Anthony, 1977; Bartiz, 1960; Willmott, 1993). Remarkably, the authors quote the very passage from Baritz (1960) that makes this point in relation to I-O psychology but fail to register its relevance to their own arguments: "The fires of pressure and control on a man are now kindles in his own thinking. Control need no longer be imposed. It can be encouraged to come from within" (Bartiz, 1960, p. 210).

Capabilities could very well function in a similar manner, that is, by serving as an ideological "false consciousness" to conceal the larger reality of one's oppression. Dean (2009) puts forth an argument along these same lines when he states, "The capabilities concept distracts from rather than assists the struggle to name and claim our human needs" (p. 262). For Dean (2009), this is because "under capitalist social relations of production, individuals can be free neither from hegemonic controls over their participation in the public realm, nor from the direct or indirect consequences of the exploitation of human labor" (p. 267).

Now perhaps capabilities could be framed to correct for—and even combat—the excesses of capitalism, but this remains a matter of debate. Without any mention of capitalism, the authors' capability approach comes across as yet another attempt to "transmute political categories into psychological categories" (Sennett, 1976, p. 259). The end result is a doubling down on the "fires of pressure and control" (Baritz, 1960, p. 210) to the point where we lose even the capability to remember their capitalist source.

Conspicuous Silence

As I have argued elsewhere (Gerard, 2014), our field's silence on capitalism suggests a comfortable complicity. To claim we simply lack the intellectual tools or institutional support to critically confront this global economic system seems to deny the obvious. Most all of us are subjected to what Bartley, Meyerson, and Grodal (2011) have called "the growing tyranny of work," comprising stagnant wages, precarious work arrangements, the demand for multiple jobs to make ends meet, and generally doing far more with far

less. Thus, we can begin studying capitalism right here at home and in our daily lives. Claiming we do not know enough—or do not know how—begs a wholly different type of POSHness we have yet to examine.

On this front, I have been encouraged by the few strong (albeit scattered) voices in our field who directly confront capitalism (Islam & Zyphur, 2006; Lefkowitz, 2003, 2017; Nord, 1974; Steffy & Grimes, 1992). Lefkowitz's work especially should be commended for rising above mere one-sided denunciations and fostering a more robust tradition of endogenous critique. But what still remains difficult to confront, returning to our history, is how even our most humanistically informed and ethically grounded initiatives can function to obscure concrete issues of power, class, and worker exploitation (see, for instance, the longstanding critiques of humanism in Marxist [Althusser, 1968] and poststructuralist [Foucault, 1966] thought). Put simply and somewhat polemically, the lasting marriage of science and humanism in I-O psychology does not always signal a good one.[1]

More generally, what is lacking is not just a capability approach but a whole conception of I-O psychology that stands at a distance from capitalism's appropriating forces—one that allows us to begin unraveling our own web of complicity and, in doing so, reinvigorate a broader working world in crisis (Gerard, 2016). Meanwhile, we remain if not handmaidens to corporate interests (Baritz, 1960) then at least handmaidens to capitalism writ large.

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[1] Building from Lefkowitz (2017), this would entail a third "course correction" to his proposed second one of "incorporating the humanistic values that are part of our professional heritage" (p. 360), especially because this professional heritage is itself ideologically fraught (Gerard, 2017).

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Let's Reduce the Human Footprint Before Building Human Capabilities

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The case for making human capabilities the business of I-O psychology is at first glance persuasive. It is indisputable that I-O psychology and its associated fields still suffer from a strong bias favoring POSH (Professionals, Official work in formal economy, Safe from discrimination, and High-income countries) and WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) societies. Gloss, Carr, Reichman, Abdul-Nasiru, and Oestereich (2017) also provide ample evidence of human development indices being low among countries that are underrepresented or unrepresented in industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology studies. Moreover, it

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