CONCEPTS OF CAPITAL. THE COMMODIFICATION OF SOCIAL LIFE BY JACEK TITTENBRUN

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The book under review consists of 27 chapters, not counting the regular portions such as introduction, index and bibliography references. The book has a clearly two-pronged structure. In other words, its two distinguishable parts refer to kind of distinct, but interrelated worlds or universes. The first one is Popper' (or Plato's, if you like) world of ideas, or more precisely, concepts, as the author deals here with a range of related concepts that have recently proliferated in essentially all social-science disciplines. More specifically, what is being targeted is the family of diverse "capitals". I am putting the term in the quotation marks, as Tittenbrun distances himself from whether human, social or cultural capital, to name but a few most popular terms at stake. What he offers instead is an in-depth critique which addresses both substantive questions - i.e. theoretical and empirical applications of the concepts concerned across a range of social-science disciplines and their logical flaws. Tittenbrun argues, namely, and in this reviewer's opinion, very convincingly so, that the terms concerned are in fact misnomers, since the only genuine capital is an economic one, and the rest constitute at best unfortunate metaphors, but at worst-which is the opinion the author himself is inclined to-pernicious "trouble-makers", whose application in sociology or other fields of inquiry entails a range of weighty implications. First and foremost, given the economic origin of the notions under consideration, it is evident, as Tittenbrun points out, that they represent an aggressive form of economic imperialism or colonialism.

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The author shows in what to the present reviewer seems a compelling analysis that indeed such harmful consequences are the result of "capital" approaches. What stands out in this part of the book is, I think, an innovative critique of Bourdieu. The author, who does not hide his left-wing sympathies, finds nevertheless fault with many, if not most of the French sociologist's arguments. From the standpoint of economic sociology, there is pretty much of interest, too, in Tittenbrun's argument, as he, inter alia, demonstrates that "human capital" is nothing other than "labor power", which, to be sure, turns all the claims put forward by human capital theory upside down.

But even more surprises can be found in the second part of the book. For the author does not confine himself to an identification and critique of what he regards as the untenable result of economics' takeover of other fields of study. Namely, he poses the critical question: what can account for the said mushrooming of capital notions across the social sciences? The answer, in his view, is to be found in the real world whose processes at the end of the day determine or condition ideational forms, which - contrary to Plato - are nothing but immutable. Tittenbrun arrives at the conclusion that the background or substratum of the ideational trends the first part of the book engages with is to be found in a range of salient processes, such as commodification and privatisation. Tittenbrun paints an impressive portrait of what he proposes to consider as structurally parallel to the conceptual trends involved, and thus going a long way toward explaining those conceptual capitals. This seems a fruitful and fascinating idea, by virtue of which the author manages to integrate a lot of is known or less known about the real-world annexations of capital and private property. The reader can get veritably stunned when reading a comprehensive overview of many various areas which have been kind of swallowed by capital and/or private property. These involve the modern state, the fundamentals of life itself, the natural environment, the death, the Third World aid, the outer space, and many others. What should be pointed out is that the analysis is not merely descriptive or empiristic, as the author applies throughout his study his own analytic framework whose central pillars are constituted by ownership and class. The notion of ownership as rent, as well as its sister notion of socio-economic class are indeed used very effectively to pin down a host of phenomena in all walks of life and to reveal their real socio-economic nature.

In a kind of programmatic chapter the author sets out to outline his general approach to the question of the place and position the economy occupies within society. Seeing the former as being inherently embedded in its societal contest, Tittenbrun cannot accept any implications of what starts from the premise of the reverse order between the two insofar as under economic imperialism the economy is not only freed from its dependency upon society at large, but viewed as the force taking over or appropriating the latter. Another important on theoretical grounds chapter is concerned with memetics, which constitutes the author's somewhat surprising choice as that strand of the sociology of knowledge that in his view can best explain the interrelations investigated earlier in the book. The choice is surprising because the said field of study can be said to represent precisely the kind of fallacy criticized throughout the book, as it, too, is based on this time round biological-metaphor.

All in all, however, the case the book makes seems overwhelming; chronological and substantive convergences between the "capital" offensive in the social sciences and the one at work in the real world are clear.

As to other features of the book being reviewed is written in simple language, accessible to lay readers and experts alike, which constitutes yet another reason for its recommendation to the readers of the journal.
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