

It's all about money and anxiety

Workers who identify with millionaires and YouTubers who teach how to make easy money: capitalism shapes our desires. Mark Fisher tried to break with such common sense.

José Heinz

In one of her strips, Mafalda walks along the pavement behind two adults in suits and briefcases heading towards a high-end car. On the way, she hears one of them say to her: -Change the world! Ha, things of youth. I had those ideas when I was a teenager, too.

The men leave in the car, and Mafalda runs to her friends (Felipe, Manolito, Miguelito) to warn them:

-Let's be boys! It turns out that if you don't hurry to change the world, it's the world that changes you!

Quino's creation exposes the generational clash between an idealistic youth, a defender of revolutionary ideas, and the capitalist man, who was able to insert himself into that system and accepts and defends it because it offers him comfort and security. Out of the picture are those expelled by that same system or those who, even inside, are at the bottom, the majority group of people exploited by those who managed to reach the top or were born there.

What for many still represents an injustice, a widening gap, is the default world of the last decades: capitalism not only proved its robustness as an economic and social system but also as a status culture measured in terms of aspiration and consumption. In addition to the failures of socialist experiments in the second half of the twentieth century, some of which are still in an agonising state, capitalism stands as a kind of common sense organiser of modern societies. It is very difficult to think outside it.

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Mural in tribute to Mark Fisher at Goldsmiths College, University of London

This last idea was the brainchild of Mark Fisher (1968-2017), the English philosopher who devoted much of his efforts to breaking this mental scheme and reflecting on other possible forms of social organisation in the 21st century, an era of accelerated change. He first established a diagnosis of the problem in his treatise [Capitalist Realism](#) (2009), which begins with a phrase attributed to Fredric Jameson and which has now become a post-Marxist slogan: it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. But he did not stop at analysis. He did his best to move forward, deepen his ideas, and offer possible alternatives, which are probably the most significant and moving part of his legacy.

A good part of these attempts are concentrated in [Postcapitalist Desire](#), a posthumous book that brings together his last lectures as a lecturer in the Visual Cultures department at Goldsmiths College, University of London. These ideas were planned to be discussed and commented on during the seminar in late 2016 and early 2017, but Fisher took his own life on 13 January 2017 and only managed to teach the first five lectures. Matt Colquhoun, a graduate student and one of his disciples, transcribed and edited those last lectures. He judiciously included the students' questions and comments, as Fisher fed back and forth with his thoughts and offered fresh approaches to his ideas. *Postcapitalist Desire* also functions as an annotated and unofficial variant of *Acid Communism*, the book he was writing before his death, in which he intended to set out these alternative paths to ubiquitous capitalism. Unfortunately, only the first few pages remained (included in [the third volume of K-Punk](#), his collected writings).

Fisher used popular culture to convey his views. Films, series, albums, advertising, and even television interviews are the raw material or vehicle for transmitting his ideas. He breaks the academic corset in form and content, making his gaze more accessible. He was also a pioneer in the use of blogs to publish texts (his text was precisely K-Punk) and used social networks as a space for political intervention until he was exhausted by the moralising dynamic of some sectors of the left against ideas with which they disagree (he left Twitter in 2013, but not before publishing in K-Punk an essay entitled ['Exit the Vampire Castle'](#), in which he addressed this state of affairs with great lucidity). Fisher argued that such attitudes were 'paralysing': the times demanded progress, and the fuel could be traced back to some unfinished revolutions of the past. One of these was the countercultural movement of the 1960s, which the author himself once disparaged but then, in his later years, began to see in a better light.

What did he mean by 'post-capitalist desire', and why did he link psychedelia with communism? Hippie culture may have failed with its naïve philosophy, but Fisher acknowledges that it devised a form of post-work that fled the logic of boss and worker. 'What if the counterculture was just a stumbling start rather than the best we could hope for? What if the success of neoliberalism was not a demonstration of the inevitability of capitalism but a testament to the magnitude of the threat posed by the spectre of a society that could be free?' he asks in the unfinished *Acid Communism*.

Fisher tells us that desire is shaped by capitalism in today's world: every aspiration or longing is linked directly or indirectly to it. It produces specific forms of desire, in the sense that whatever is wanted needs capital to be

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obtained, be it a smartphone or a home. Those impulses, generally driven by advertising, aspirational or a sense of belonging (today very much present in social networks), push us to seek money to obtain them. In more than one sense, these desires work like the unattainable carrot: working hard for a goal

that is very difficult to obtain from the base of society, the proletariat, but whose path is saturated with messages to the contrary.

Summed up in three words: everything is money. It spread an idea of success and freedom associated with millionaire entrepreneurs, usually from the world of technology (one of the examples Fisher gives is [1984](#), the famous Apple advertising directed by Ridley Scott), or characters who claim to have escaped from the hamster wheel, who no longer depend on bosses or schedules, but still talk about capital as the engine of comfort (making money 'work for you').

Although Fisher expressed these ideas several years ago, today they resonate more than ever: if, during the coronavirus pandemic, the virtues of remote work or [the economy of passion](#) were discussed, the post-Covid world shows that the forms of precariousness have only been accentuated, fundamentally in those non-unionised people who depend on several jobs to round off a salary and who, by practising home office, cannot separate their work tasks from those of the home.

The capitalist gaze that hovers over the freelance world projects a tempting image: digital nomads sitting with their laptops in some speciality coffee shop around the world. That's the surface, the Instagram post that sometimes includes motivational copy about the benefits of work that can be done anywhere with an internet connection. Indeed, Fisher has pointed to Starbucks as a chain that offers 'generic socialisation', in the sense that its regulars feel a desire for the collective ("What communism would offer would be to have these generic spaces where people can come in without having to pay for shitty coffee. That's the public space we need in the future, where people can come together without the parasitic attachments of capital", reads the third volume of K-Punk).

However, such a display on social networks can't get into their heads, into the B-side of the self-employed, which is the anxiety of constantly generating money, no longer becoming rich but surviving. 'The big lie that we've been

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sold since neoliberalism is that if we take away people's security, extract a kind of social security and suddenly everything is creative, that wellspring of creativity will just emerge,' Fisher said at *Cyberspace-time Crisis*, [a conference](#) he gave in Belgium in 2013. 'Well, what happens if you take away the worker's security is what happened to me when I was a self-employed person: all their creative energy is focused on how to make more money. This is society's energy, this stupidity that people have to be always thinking about [...] We shouldn't worry about making money every waking hour of the day. That's the reality that has been artificially imposed on us.

In a world where capital accumulation is valued more than the social benefits of a profession, the worker identifies less with a trade than with the figure of the successful entrepreneur, even if he or she will never be like him or her. Capitalism does not point out this contradiction but transforms this mirage into a horizon. The prevailing depression and anxiety are, in many cases, a consequence of this mismatch, but the message that comes down is that it is the subject's fault and not the system's (Fisher called it the "privatisation of stress"). Hence, there is the appearance of so many modern gurus who succeed with their promises of easy money and financial freedom: they represent the shortcut to that aspiration, a cardboard world devised in the image and likeness of the success of the time.

In addition to a deep sadness at the abruptness of his death, the figure of Mark Fisher left several open fronts based on his unfinished ideas. These ideas function as a strong and slightly hopeful message: it is now the mission of his disciples and readers to continue discussing them. In his lecture on 7 November 2016, a student asked him about the impulses that would drive someone to work in a post-capitalist society. What would motivate the worker if his

or her economic security were guaranteed? Fisher responds with an example that would surely have pleased Mafalda: "I think of the Beatles. What does a post-work society look like? It sounds like what life was like for them, doesn't it? [...] Surely, they had made enough money in the early sixties to simply not work any more. Then, their most interesting experimental material emerged. That material came about partly because they were freed from the pressure of having to worry about pay. They actually sold more anyway!".

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❖ **About the author: José Sainz** is a journalist, cultural manager, teacher and writer. His articles have been published in media such as L'Officiel, Rolling Stone, JotDown (Spain), Anfibia, El Replicante (Mexico) and La Voz del Interior, where he was editor and publisher.



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Portal on the net: <https://www.jussemper.org/>
e-mail: informa@jussemper.org