

Mental Capitalism*

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Everything smacks of publicity. Wherever we look, there are logos, whatever the event, we are reminded of sponsors. Advertising finances mass culture but, increasingly, high culture, too. Consumption has shifted from products to brands. Branded goods are commodity-shaped advertisements. We are witnessing an invasion of brands. Before our eyes, cities and landscapes mutate into advertising media. Publicity settles like mildew on everything open to public view. It determines the shape of everything intent on making a public impression: also the shape of politics. Political parties are advertised like registered trade marks. The thirst of politics for promotion outlays has reached a point where it corrupts the traditional party system and has become a major source of political scandal.

What is it that endows publicity with such power? Is it technological progress or dominant economics? Are we confronted with a new phenomenon or with the culmination of old trends? Is publicity a symptom of information society? Or is it a novel manifestation of technology and social economy?

The publicity flood: symptom for what?

There are standard economic reasons for promotion activities. Expenditure on advertising pays where economies of scale can be exploited. Economies of scale are characteristic of Fordist production. They are sizeable in the case of information

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goods since information products involve high overhead costs but negligible reproduction costs. In a communication network, both economic efficiency and attractiveness increase with the number of network participants. Accordingly, the role played by advertising in an industrial society expands in information society. Still, all those reasons do not sufficiently explain the penetrating force of publicity and its spillover beyond the limits of sales promotion. They may explain why the incitement, channelling and seduction of attention today regularly accompanies economic activity, but they fail to explain why the scramble for attention has turned into the overriding objective.

Publicity depends on media: media presenting a message while absorbing attention. Electronic media are particularly well-equipped for presentation. Electronic ways of reproducing, multiplying and spreading patterns of stimulation have a clout in reinforcing presentation. At the same time, distribution via technological channels facilitates the measurement of attention being skimmed off. The effective sales of information delivered by the media are measured via circulation figures, audience ratings, or number of visits to web sites. Together with today's technological media, an infrastructure has sprung up which provides wholesale access to entire populations while at the same time continuously surveying demand. And yet: not even state-of-the-art information and communication technology fully explain the impertinence of publicity. We can switch off TV but cannot forego facing advertisements. Wherever we look, wherever we run, advertising is in place already.

The involuntary consumption of publicity amounts to a tax being levied on perception. This tax is irrational from the point of view of the rational consumer assumed in economic theory. It also contradicts the technological media's role as mind amplifiers. However, can a phenomenon of such overwhelming presence be explained by sheer absence of reason? Shouldn't we rather wonder whether our conceptions of economics and technology are too narrow? Could the omnipresence of advertising not be symptomatic for a dynamic of social change that so far has gone unnoticed in economics and media theory?

The contention that we are dealing with some profound change takes shape if we remember similar upheavals in the past, like the ones that accompanied industrialisation. Industrial capitalism led to new ownership relations, to the transformation of common land into private property, to the growth of vertically integrated markets, to the enforcement of homogenous currency systems, and to the evolution of finance as a specialised economic sector. In the following, I shall elaborate on the conjecture that we are witnessing another revolution of this kind, taking place beneath the surface on which advertising spreads. I suspect that we have to do with a new kind of capitalism, a capitalism different from the one usually addressed as New Economy. Let me sketch this – mental – kind of capitalism in the form of four propositions:

1. What we are witnessing is a new type of privatisation of public space: privatisation of the space of experience.
2. The privatisation of this ‘experience-space’ is connected with – and promoted by – the emergence of new markets. New in the sense that it is not money which is exchanged for information, but attention.
3. Attention as such is not a means of payment. It only becomes a currency when it is measured in homogenous units and made to circulate via anonymous exchange acts.
4. The currency system of attention relies on specialised financial services. This banking and stock-exchange function is performed by the mass media.

(ad 1) Privatisation of public experience-space

Advertising would not be ubiquitous if presentation were only taking hold of the technological media. Particularly striking, however, is the way in which public space in cities, or areas along traffic routes, and increasingly also the open landscape, are incorporated. Those kinds of space are epitomes of public goods. Even when buildings or land are privately owned, urban space or the open

landscape keep their public, communal nature. This public-good quality is the object of building and landmark regulations. Precisely this public-good quality of public space is now being privatised. Public space is studded with billboards and installations serving as eye-catchers, it is transformed into an advertising medium. A lot is paid for utilisation as advertising medium – both by those active in the advertising business and those suffering from the disfigurement of public space. However, while the benefit involved is appropriated privately, the respective costs are borne by the general public.

The same development can be observed in public television and in publicly financed culture. The existence of publicly-owned television companies goes back to the same reasons that account for aesthetic commissioning in building codes and landscape protection regulations. Their rationale lies in defending public experience-space against the baseness of private profit-seeking. Quality standards are established and fees are levied, so that people will have something decent to look at. But what will public television companies do next? They will maximise their audience ratings in order to use their medium as advertising vehicle. They will engage in the same racket as private television companies, perhaps hampered by a few inconvenient rules and standards. Their business, too, is the collection of as much attention as possible. Audience ratings measure the attention a medium attracts in return for the information it offers. This service of attraction is sold to the advertising industry. Private television lives entirely on selling this service, but public television profits from it, too. Both kinds of television companies thus feel encouraged to investigate what the public wants to see or hear in order to maximise the attraction of attention; this attraction can then be re-sold for money.

Nothing different is happening when sponsors take over the financing of culture. Sponsors, too, buy the service of attraction. Whatever culture is on offer, it performs this service of attraction; sponsors buy the service in order to plant themselves in the limelight. Financing via advertising always means that nominally public space is transformed into a market where, on the one hand, the information offered is paid by attention and where, on the other hand, the service of attraction is sold for money.

(ad 2) New markets

The emergence of those new markets is crowding out traditional forms and kinds of public space. They are the new arenas for culture and sports, for political debate and the struggle for power. One notices their operation by the pungent ferment of publicity. The new markets are markets in the full sense of the term. They organise supply by testing preparedness to pay. Only, in this case, payment is not effected in money but in attention. The attention paid is measured through number of visitors, audience ratings, or opinion-polls. By being measured, attention is homogenised. Attention, when taken as such, is not a homogenous measure of value. The value of attention we receive in inter-personal exchange is thoroughly individual. It depends on our own esteem for the person paying attention to us, and on the appreciation conveyed by way of the payment. But when we measure the size of editions, number of viewers, or circulation figures, attention is reduced to sheer quantity. Anything individual in it is neutralised by homogenisation. Adaptation to sheer quantity lies behind the transition from elitist culture over to event- and rating-culture; behind the invasion of brands; behind the change of party democracy into media democracy. The consequences are even more profound. Attention as a means of payment induces further technological change and establishes a new slant between the rich and the poor.

Technological change induced through the new markets is not limited to information and communication technology. Through competition for attention a very special kind of technology has entered the scene. It is linked to communication techniques, but differs from networks and technical equipment. The technology applied to maximise editions, audience ratings, or circulation figures consists in certain methods of filling the channels. This form of maximisation relies on a technology of attraction differing from the technology of engineers. Traditionally, the methods of mass attraction were not even recognised as technology. They were developed in advertising agencies and film studios, by the mass media and in the world of fashion. They are not based on any theory but

on experience and informed intuition. Meanwhile, they have developed into a sophisticated technique. Mass attraction is staged with a high degree of professionalism and is the technological basis of advanced industries.

A concept of technology not encompassing the technology of attraction would be too narrow to account for the new economy. A narrow concept of technology would suggest that in information society social classes are differentiated by being “information-rich” or “information-poor”. Such a view would not just be simplistic, it would overlook the crux of the matter. For, the wealth accumulated in the new markets does not consist of knowledge, poverty in them does not just mean unsatisfied thirst for knowledge. The wealthy ones, those who are successful in the new markets, are wealthy in recognition. The poverty of those who are passed over consists in lack of recognition. Wealthy people in the new economy are those whose attention earnings are larger by orders of magnitude than their spending. The poor are those who do not get enough attention to keep their self-esteem intact. This wealth of some and the poverty of all the others are inter-related: the amount of recognition available for distribution is not unlimited. The attention circulating in society is finite. Those who have can only be given if something is taken away from those who have not.

(ad 3) From exchanged attention to psychic currency

Traditionally, it was the privilege of high birth, exceptional talent, or ravishing beauty to grow rich in attention. Today, anyone can become prominent. In the new economy, the office boy turned millionaire is the candidate in a casting show who rises to being a media star. The production of media prominence, progress in attraction technology and the growth of new types of markets are all different aspects of the same thing. They are possible because attention is minted into an anonymous means of payment. The overall effect is that the currency in circulation is expanding.

The volume of attention channelled off by the media and redistributed in the competition over ratings or reach is not identical with the total amount of attention circulating in society. What is circulating is both attention exchanged person-to-person and attention spent on mediated information. Only the latter kind is homogenised by quantitative measurement, thus assuming the nature of an anonymous means of payment. Only through unprecedented growth in the volume of this currency could fortunes like media prominence arise. Only the rise of mass business led to the emergence of a technology of mass attraction. The key to understanding the development of mental capitalism thus lies in answering the question how the spending and earning of attention became a technologically advanced economy. Which growth factors were at work that turned the exchange of information for attention into big business?

Provision of information in return for attention has been the job of culture since it was industrialised. Looking for the driving forces at work therefore means tracing the mutation of cultural life into a mass business. The prerequisites for this mutation were the development of a technological infrastructure enabling mass distribution of information as well as the evolution of certain types of popular culture engaged in finding out what mass audiences want to see, hear, or read. A further, decisive influence stimulating the unprecedented increase in the volume of anonymously paid attention was the existence of an internal circuit for the collection and reinvestment of attention. Only those genres of popular culture succeeded in becoming mass media that invested a sufficiently large amount of attraction power in breeding champions capable of mass attraction.

Stars drawing large audiences cannot be created simply with money. Something else is needed. Talents have to be offered presentation space or broadcasting time. Attention must be granted in advance. Only those suppliers of information that are known for reliably attracting vast amounts of attention are capable of granting such credit. Media of this kind can sell services of attraction to the advertising business; but they can also reinvest their power of attraction to increase their magnetism. Guaranteed attention can give talents a chance or can be used for piling up so much attention on successful personalities that they become known by

everybody, and even become known for being known by everybody. The high technology of attraction works with this kind of self-reinforcing publicity. It works with known faces everybody wants to see because everybody knows that all the others also see them. What would become of cinema, sports, talk shows or soap operas without those stars?

But not only the stars are profiting from all the commotion around known faces. In fact, through their stars, the media presenting them become major earners themselves. A medium that invests in promoting a star will participate in the profit created with the credit it offers. The analogy with banks goes even further. Attention credit creates psychic currency in the same way that bank credit creates money. The money supply grows if bank credit surpasses deposits, and the amount of attention turned over by the media increases if it pays to expand presentation space beyond realised attraction capacity.

(ad 4) The financial industries of mental capitalism

That the media are functioning as banks is exemplified by their interaction with politics. Politics, like advertising, is pushing its way into the media. Politicians are no longer happy with just being shown, they want to be presented in the best possible way, by the most attractive channels, during prime time. They demand the advance payment of guaranteed attention also granted to people whom that medium presents on its own initiative. Therefore, the conditions for receiving this financial service will depend on the politicians' personal performance in the medium. If a politician is likely to increase the attention paid to that medium, it will grant him attention credit. If the politician's presentation is not profitable, or not profitable enough, then cash will have to be taken in hand.

The media are financing the making of politicians in the same way that banks are financing business. Like business, politics is shaped by the respective financing conditions. Politicians will make an effort to present themselves in a way

appreciated by the medium: they will not only watch out for their own image, but also for the ratings. If they are willing to act as carthorses for the respective medium, they can maximise their credit and minimise the money spent on media presence. They will thus be interested in making use of professional attraction technologies. They will entrust themselves to advisers well versed in those technologies and also familiar with the credit sector of attention.

The transition from party- to media democracy is marked by politicians no longer being satisfied with their role as objects of reporting. They become the medium's business partners. In this new role, politicians use the media not only for selling their policies; they also serve the medium's self-interest in order to get hold of as much advertising space as possible. This change of role brings about a change in the requirements for and the patterns of political careers. Being telegenic is necessary today, but no longer sufficient. You have to have the makings for media prominence. A politician's typical career pattern will combine moving up in the party hierarchy with increasing affluence in media attention. Prominence is that level of attentive wealth where the affluence becomes conspicuous and itself turns into a source of attention income.

What does this co-operation with politics reveal about the media? It shows that the media, within the attention economy, are what the financial sector is in money capitalism. The media are capitalising attention: they receive attention with such regularity and certainty that they are able to offer it on credit as starting capital; they make use of fortunes by reinvesting attention wealth into attraction; they list the market value of fortunes by measuring their power of attraction. Just as banks are providing growing economies with an expanding money supply, the media are supplying expanding information markets with growing amounts of attention. Lastly, in the same way that financial markets have transposed the internal capitalisation strategy of companies to the macroeconomic level, the media are transposing the capitalisation of attention from the level of personal dexterity to that of an organised public sphere.

Is the conjecture of mental capitalism tenable?

If the economy of attention has in fact assumed the stature of a capitalist system, the furnishing of experience-space with advertisements appears in a new light. Capitalism is an exceedingly dynamic, thoroughly mobilising and aggressively expanding economic system. A capitalist economy of attention means that the struggle for attention becomes professional, technological and indispensable. Anything that lives on being noticed will be drawn into this struggle. No selling without mind-grabbing; no social impact without strategic placement in public awareness.

Admittedly, speaking about a new stage of capitalism is no small matter. Capitalism in terms of attention goes further than any apprehensions of cultural criticism. It culminates in the idea that the cultural supra-structure not only reflects the economic base, but that it has assimilated it. Such an assumption must withstand testing in the counter-current. It must satisfy all the criteria implied in the concept of capitalism. In order to reverse the burden of proof, the four initial propositions discussed above will be tested against the following control propositions:

1. The term capitalist production relations signifies more than production for markets. Characteristic for those relations is the replacement of use value by exchange value. Hence, the replacement of differences in quality by differences in quantity ought to show up in cultural self-perception.
2. The successful establishment of capitalist production relations is heralded by the unprecedented unleashing of productive forces and by a hitherto unknown degree of creative destruction. This trait, too, would have to be discernible in mental capitalism.

3. It is characteristic for capitalist production relations that they are ideologically justified and beautified to camouflage unfettered commercialisation. Such ideological removal of all inhibitions would have to be noticeable in mental capitalism.
4. No capitalism without exploitation and social conflict. Capitalism in what is mental would have to manifest itself in a tendency for growing psychic destitution and in revolts against narcissistic injuries.

(ad 1) Qualitative difference dissolving into quantitative difference

The arrival of post-modernism marked a break in cultural self-perception. This not only meant noting that current production constituted a completely new era but also realising, in retrospect, that indications of change had been building up for a long time. Post-modernist discourse distanced itself from modernism, characterising it as an era in which rigid categorisation, binary dichotomies, searching for essential differences were dissociated from the historical background and cultural context. Accused of being typically modernistic, sharp distinctions between nature and culture, male and female, high art and popular art, the arts and science, economics and epistemology came under critical scrutiny. Essential distinctions were replaced by systems of variation and differentiation, ontological distinctions gave way to varying social constructs. The borderlines between historical genesis and logical validity, between discovery context and justification context, between the invention of hypotheses and the discovery of facts began to be blurred. Everywhere one noted sliding scales, moving ratios, fuzzy interfaces, hybrid mixtures, opportunistic adaptations.

Deconstruction goes all out, knows no ultimate limits, does not respect any central core. If one takes it seriously as a way of perceiving cultural change, it is in fact a reaction to the liquefaction and homogenisation processes actually taking place. Deconstruction undermines a paradigm that partitions cultural life according to bureaucratic departmentalisation; this old paradigm is replaced by chaotic

self-organisation. In the social context, systems of chaotic self-organisation able to replace bureaucratic organisation take the shape of markets. Markets in this most general sense are decentralised bargaining systems whose firm structures consist in habitual exchange relations and established exchange values.

If cultural life has in fact arrived at a stage to be described as capitalist economy of attention, this change of paradigm was indeed a highly sensitive reaction, even more remarkable since it took place outside the trodden paths of economic thought. In the economic sphere, the replacement of a use value-oriented regime by an exchange value-oriented one would have been registered. Under capitalism, factual validity assumes the format of capital – capital in the shape of confidence, creditworthiness, reputation, whatever. The validity established and maintained by this regime is relative from the outset and remains in force only as long as it withstands erosion by constant competition and aggressive forces of dissolution. Whatever survives will do so only as long as it satisfies effective demand, i.e. if there is preparedness to pay – preparedness to pay attention, of course.

The spearheads of deconstruction are targeting the status of scientific theories and facts. Proponents of the “strong programme” in the sociology of science view scientific theories just as means of production used in the production of other theories that are fabricated to replace the preceding ones. Even scientific facts, they assert, are social constructs, valid only as long as they prove their productiveness through the construction of other facts. This extreme form of relativism affects the issue of mental capitalism for two reasons. First, it means that the scientific economy of attention must be taken into account. Second, it marks the point where its provocation has had consequences. What happened was the declaration of “science wars”.

(ad 2) Unleashing of productive forces

Science is a closed economy of attention. Scientists invest their own attention to obtain at the attention of other scientists. They are not only intent on satisfying their own curiosity and their desire for exploration: what they also wish is to be reviewed and cited. Review and citation measure the value of scientific information. They measure the other scientists' preparedness to pay attention to a fellow-scientist's production. Scientists spend their own attention on the production of others in order to increase their own productivity. They are interested in pre-fabricated knowledge acting as means of production in the production of knowledge.

The scientific economy of attention is a capitalist one. The major inputs in knowledge production are pre-fabricated knowledge and fresh attention. Scientific information, being a produced means of production, is a capital good. The market in which this kind of capital good is traded is called scientific communication. Supply takes the shape of publication. Through publication the respective information becomes accessible for everyone, but it also establishes intellectual property. Permission to use somebody else's property as one's own means of production is obtained by acquiring a licence and by paying a fee. The licence for productive re-use of published information is obtained through citation, the fee takes the shape of attention which the citing author transfers to the cited one.

Science is a model economy in the dual sense of the term. It is a model both with respect to its capitalist mode and because of its efficiency in production. It is characteristic for the capitalist mode of production to employ pre-fabricated means of production and to transform the heterogeneous assemblage of means of production into a homogenous good called "capital". Scientific information acting as means of production consists of theses, hypotheses, theories, theorems, facts - i.e. chunks of information that are factually incomparable and which, taken by themselves, do not contain any common - e.g. information-theoretic - measure. For this heterogeneous assemblage to be transformed into units of capital, it must be evaluated, i.e. measured by homogenous units. In the case of assets of production, this measurement is effected by their transformation into financial capital, i.e. by translation into shares entitling the holder to obtain some of the

profit. In the case of scientific assets of production, no financial profit accrues (unless the assets are cast in the mould of patents; but by being patented the information completely disappears from the capital market of scientific communication). The profits negotiated in this market accrue in terms of attention. The respective measuring unit is the citation. The number of citations collected by a particular piece of scientific information is a measure for both the amount of its re-utilisation in production and for the attention income earned by the author. The list of citations is the functional equivalent of financial capital; scientific real capital must assume this form in order to operate as capital in the full sense of this concept. Scientists' personal accounts of citations represent the kind of wealth they are out to maximise. Personal wealth of this kind is called scientific reputation.

Science is a capitalist sector of the attention economy, regardless whether or not the rest of the economy is organised in a capitalist way. Science is also an example for the unleashing of productive forces brought about by the introduction of capitalist production relations. The scientific economy of attention has been capitalist ever since the scientific division of labour became common practice and since scientific communication began to function like a market for published information. Scientific capitalism arose in parallel with industrial capitalism. Both these capitalisms were characterised by an unprecedented degree of productive destruction; they both revolutionised traditional production relations and were both accompanied by a new, ruthless style of rationality. They both ran into philosophical opposition – and have continued to do so until today. However, in contrast to industrial capitalism, the capitalist mode of knowledge production did not become the subject of radical economic criticism. From the very start, the scientific economy of attention was a model economy. If mental capitalism has in the meantime also become a category deserving criticism, then this must be due to some fundamental change. The markets in which information and attention are exchanged must have assumed a new character.

(ad 3) Economic base and ideological superstructure

Mental capitalism, manifesting itself in ebullience of advertising, actually serves a kind of market that differs from the market of scientific communication. Scientific communication is a capital market. Here, producers offer means of production to other producers. The media, on the other hand, are markets for consumption goods. The markets for mental assets are small and refined. The attention earned there is limited in amount, but of superior quality. It comes from people sharing the same interests, education and professional ethos. When this market opens up to the general consumer, then small, noble attention incomes become ordinary and large.

The way in which this opening-up is happening has a visible effect on science itself. The potential customers of scientific information are now not only other scientists, but also the mass media and the entertainment industry. Scientists can earn hefty side-incomes of attention by running columns in newspapers, by appearing in talk shows or by going into the popularisation business in some other way. Scientists who succumb to such temptations, but also members of disciplines with a longer tradition of serving large markets, will enjoy the message that, anyway, what science is about is to cause a stir. They will be pleased to hear that hard boundaries between scientific and non-scientific communication are nothing but pretence, certainly nothing essential. The greatest hit for them would be if someone managed to unmask all hard scientific facts as social constructs.

If one considers the deconstruction of scientific objectivity from this perspective, the “science wars” are revealed to be classic cases of ideological debate camouflaging fights over market shares. Fighting is done on an eminently intellectual plane, but the battle heat is produced by solid economic interests. The opening-up of firmly sealed capital markets requires a certain absence of inhibitions, a loosening of restraints formerly imposed by strict professional codes of conduct. It is very helpful indeed when intellectual *libertinage* and frivolity become fashionable. In order to establish that a connection between this observed loosening-up and some economic motive exists, it would be necessary for the deconstruction message to land exclusively where opening-up promises profits. And, indeed, actual battlefronts in the “science wars” run between disciplines that

owe their exceptional prestige to their rigorous sealing off of internal scientific capital markets and other disciplines that are only able to enrich themselves through outside sources, not having enjoyed their rival disciplines' traditional prestige.

Although the differentiation between capital goods markets and consumption goods markets is particularly sharp within the scientific economy of attention, science is by no means the only sphere where such a differentiation is made. Wherever a clear slant between high culture and popular culture exists, this distinction can be observed. High culture is autonomous, guided exclusively by its own criteria and responding only to demands articulated from within. One's own personal criteria are the same as those of one's fellow-producers, demands arising within the sphere are formulated by members of one's guild. High culture is staged for co-producers and relies on judgement by colleagues. A brilliant example for this is literature, as described by Pierre Bourdieu with respect to French 19th-century literary writing. The only people allowed to express any opinions apart from the producers are, perhaps, critics who are themselves good at the trade. But even in the literary field one can today observe restrictions melting away. A prime example is the business of literature presentation on television. However, even without TV involvement, quite generally, the borderlines between cultural capital goods markets and cultural consumption goods markets are eroding. A clear indicator for the crumbling of those borderlines is the presence of advertising. One cannot fail to observe that the message of dissolution and liquefaction dominates wherever the lure of larger audiences works. Ideological justification and the removal of intellectual restraints on profiteering are features not unfamiliar to mental capitalism.

(ad 4) Exploitation and social conflict

Conflicting economic interests hiding behind the facade of post-modern discourse are nothing but internal struggles between different fractions of capital. Real

conflicts in capitalism are something else. True and existential conflicts in capitalism are those between the class of capitalists on the one hand and the class of those feeding the capitalists on the other hand. At first sight one might think that mental capitalism, in this respect, is more harmless than financial capitalism. What we are confronted with is a blatantly unequal distribution of attention between those who appear in the media and those who do not. The masses behave as if they could never get enough of prominent people.

However, taking a closer look, we notice signs of protest. Together with the invasion of brand names and logos have we witnessed the infiltration of graffiti. The sprayers have turned the tables. They react to the organised mass struggle for attention by piercing the onlookers' eyes. Early opposition expressed by graffiti developed into a protest movement against the brands' occupation policy. Today, opponents of globalisation are protesting against this occupation not just in optical ways and no longer surreptitiously. They view invasion by brands as one example of negative globalisation. Another negative aspect of globalisation is economic exploitation of low-wage workers and of low-wage countries – but this is not all. There is also the global export of Western mass culture. The protest movement is reacting with adequate sensitivity – but rather confused analyses - to the fact that exploitation is taking place at two different levels: the level of labour markets and the level of markets where information is exchanged for attention.

In the economy of attention, the units corresponding to national economies are differing cultures. Exchange goes on between cultures just like between national economies. Cultures export information goods and earn attention for them, or they import information goods and export attention for them. For exchange to be fair and profitable, trade balances need not be balanced for each individual exchange act, but they ought to be balanced on a global scale. However, if we consider today's global cultural situation we observe an extreme imbalance between the culture of advanced mental capitalism and the culture of the rest of the world. The most advanced – Western – cultures export information massively and import huge amounts of live attention for it, while the cultures of other regions export very modest amounts of information and accordingly earn little attention for it.

Also, in the sphere of culture – perhaps particularly in culture – there are clear winners and losers with respect to globalisation. The world is submerged by Western mass culture, with the export culture barely camouflaging its predominance by interspersed bits of multi-culture that are exported, too. The gap between cultures poor or rich in attention is widening just like the economic gap between economically poor or rich countries. The cultural gap is no less ominous. One may not be able to make a living on attention income, but the attention one earns nourishes self-esteem. People's attention income determines how much feeling of their own worth they can enjoy. The self-esteem of both individuals and cultures depends on the appreciation they receive. If their self-esteem is shaken, both individuals and countries may feel forced to resort to self-defence. They may feel forced to convince themselves and others that those who refuse to pay attention to them are unworthy of their own attention. Forced denigration of others whose lack of esteem one cannot bear is an ancient source of aggression between people. Under mental capitalism, it becomes a natural defence mechanism, as it were, of those who find themselves on the exploited side.

The kind of exploitation characteristic for mental capitalism is the exploitation of large numbers of people who always pay attention but are hardly ever respected. The form of self-defence typical of this kind of capitalism consists in denigrating what one desires, so one will suffer less from missing it. Misery because of lacking self-esteem may hurt just like physical destitution; thirst for recognition may render as aggressive as an empty stomach. The desire to humiliate those who refuse to pay respect to others needing that respect to keep up their self-esteem lies behind self-sacrificing terrorist attacks on symbols of Western export culture. It also is the cause of resentments that new right-wing populist movements manipulate and it explains the demonstrative violence and nazi symbols which the attention economy's *lumpenproletariat* use to grab some attention they will otherwise never receive. The split between social classes follows the dividing line between, on the one hand, the owners of cultural and social capital which is providing them with more attention than they can spend, and, on the other hand, the have-nots who can only pay attention to each other.

Narcissistic culture

Mental capitalism is hard and frivolous. It conquers the inner core of the self and intervenes in identity-building. It is frivolous because of the unequal distribution of chances and because of the extravagance it engenders. Here, on this side, there are celebrities and sumptuously staged personalities bathing in attention; over there, people are starving and committing acts of desperation to get into the limelight just once. This inequality, as such, is not completely new. The innovation lies in the systematic way in which it is created. What is new is the sheer volume of attention being collected and redistributed; new is the self-organising economic regularity expressing itself through anarchic fights over distribution; new is the deterministic linkage between the wealth of some and the poverty of all the others.

Publicity, a surface phenomenon of this economic sphere, becomes symptomatic. It is symptomatic for societies in which the desire for social status has overtaken the desire for material wealth. No status without attention. The general fight for attention leads to the mass production of means for inciting attention as well as to the development of means for the public registration of attention income. Publicity is the most direct, most mundane and least differentiated application of those means. Advertising facilities and slogans are products exclusively manufactured to attract attention. Their mass distribution is pungent to the point of giving offence and is, at the same time, a means of documenting the successful accomplishment of attraction. Something we stumble across constantly is not only pushing itself into our consciousness; at the same time it tells us that everybody is familiar with it. With primitive but effective methods it conquers the status of prominence. Advertising, symptomatic for mental capitalism, means producing prominence of things and symbols.

For things and symbols, the *via regia* into subjective experience is their promise that consuming them will make the consumer irresistible. It is clear that in a society where attention income becomes a major objective, consumption will follow the pull of self-esteem. Consumption subjected to the pull of self-esteem means that labour is being spent on one's attractiveness. This individual labour opens up unexpectedly ample fields of action for publicity. Advertising assumes the role of personal counsellor on individual attractiveness. It can now unfold its subtle qualities. The social psychologist Christopher Lasch has described the cult around one's own attractiveness as an aspect of narcissistic culture. This is a social expression of fragile self-esteem. When consumption style becomes a feature of this culture, products have to carry the promise of conferring fitness in the fight for attention. The nature of mental capitalism is such that advertising never tires of drumming out this message.