

Savage, Mike. *The Return of Inequality: Social Change and the Weight of the Past*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2021. xi + 422 pages. Hardcover, \$35.00.

Peter Salmon, interpreting Derrida's work, writes, "Criticism, in privileging form over force, the static over the genetic, freezes meaning."¹ Mike Savage's *The Return of Inequality* argues that studies of inequality have wrongfully privileged the form of inequality over the accumulative, longitudinal force of inequality. The text is an ambitious multidisciplinary project. I believe that anyone interested in studying inequality should pick up this book.

Using sociology, public policy, and political science frames, Savage takes readers on a tour, first, of the state of inequality research, especially since Piketty's *Capital*. Taking a step back, Savage presents Bourdieu's work on social fields, key to the later analysis of national spaces under duress. By the end of the first section, Savage's intervention is clear: the inequality literature has become too concerned with relative and spatial measures of inequality.

Visualizations that dig beyond wealth deciles and into the top 1 percent have exposed elites and their pulling-away-from-the-pack wealth building. These visuals have had a role in driving a wide range of organizing, from movements like Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter, to populist projects like Brexit and Donald Trump's politics. For Savage, these spatial and structural depictions of inequality have been useful in fomenting politics around inequality but not always its driver, the over-time accumulation of capital.

Never mentioned, I see Walter Benjamin's reflections on the artist Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* as the philosophical guide of this work. Benjamin's description of Klee's "angel of history," the angel of progress, is ever-present: "Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe... This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. The storm is what we call progress."²

That pile of historical, yet now-in-motion debris, which Savage argues scholars of inequality and activists alike must address more concretely and now, is capital. With arguments that are more radical than progressive, he begs us to focus on capital as accrual across time.

Did inequality ever go away? Savage's answer is complicated. In a sense, inequality really did go somewhere. In the postwar United States economic boom, a rising tide lifted many boats. Liberal democracies often *seem* to work better in prosperity's light. For public policy, from the Great Society until stagflation and the Reagan Revolution, anything seemed possible. Meanwhile, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s kept alive the idea that a post-imperial United States nation-state was possible, worked out through legalistic fixes for the national demos and a federalist patchwork of state policies.

Now, Savage writes at a time where liberal democratic nation-state projects seem as frayed as ever, and he places the blame squarely on our failure to address the historical weight of capital, be that economic capital and the "stickiness at the top," or the weightiness of social and political capitals. He criticizes the professionalization of politics, elite capture, and government done by "bespoke focus groups." These trends in government, he argues, cause disenchantment in both those at the bottom of the income distribution as well as those upwardly mobile, middle professional classes. Savage suggests that for those of lowest income globally, civic society institutions are being abandoned. For those with upward mobility within middle income distributions, Savage paints a picture of frustration rooted in a front-row view of entrenched elites playing by a different set of rules.

Each chapter of *The Return of Inequality* builds the argument that the weight of the past has become too heavy for "nation spaces" to bear. I wonder if this goes far enough. Savage reminds us that nation-states developed in part as a way to establish racial stratifications at the

periphery of empire. To think of nations as a successor of this domination seems pivotal to tackle. Let's pause to consider that the nation-state is in truth an endogenous technology to capitalism. Put another way, nation states have been *the* tool of capitalism, not capitalism as something simply regulated by nation states *ex post facto*. The racio-legal stratifications at the periphery of empire were built to enable extractive and cruel capitalisms, be it in dispossession at the beginning of British agricultural capitalism or in the chattel slavery of mercantile capitalism (see broadly *Predicting the Fifth Phase...*, Croce 2017). Savage asks us to imagine a 'sustainable nationalism', but I can't help but wonder if that's an oxymoron.

At the end of the text Savage asks, echoing (and immediately steamrolling) Lenin, "What is to be done?" His call here is multi-faceted: a radical searching of the past within the present, the end of growth-for-growth's-sake politics in exchange for a politics of sustainability, and a "non-categorical politics." His non-categorical politics are hard to summarize because they're hard to imagine, but they would transform hermetic and liberal identity into something radical, with a focus on public stewardship and support of "positive projects, passions, and desires" (p. 321). He also calls for a "sustainable nationalism" and a new humanism with a search for the 'good life' at its root. With limited space, I must point out the specter of Hegel's philosophy of an ethical state here. Any work along this line needs to problematize itself vis-à-vis Hegel.

There's an appeal to Savage's call for this new humanism. I see the entreaty here somewhat at odds with, say, Aaron Bastani's *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*, which (in a probably oversimplified reading) argues that an abundance of data and automated production will bring about capitalism's end as a matter of course. Inspired by Savage, I push back: without a discourse and historical dialectic to inform what abundance is good for, it will only bring more of the same. Even after capitalism, perhaps that will be the nature of capital.

What is the place of elites in negotiating this new humanism? Are they truly interested in engaging in a critical analysis of their own capital, which, I wonder if Savage might agree, mandates a sociology of ghosts (*Ghostly Matters*, Gordon 1997) or a hauntology (Derrida)? And, honestly, is the origin story of the national form so historically heavy—as endogenous technology of capitalism—that talking of sustainable nationalism is akin to a search for sustainable capitalism?

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NOTES

¹ Peter Salmon. *An Event, Perhaps: A Biography of Jacques Derrida* (London: Verso, 2020), 112.

² Walter Benjamin. “Theses on the Philosophy of History: Thesis IX.” In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn, 257–58. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.