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Creative Destruction

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GLOSSARY

Creative Destruction

ADDED

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For Schumpeter, the future of capitalism was bleak. Threatened by the advancement of bureaucracy, rationalization, and drab routine, he was fearful capitalism would fall prey to its very successes and self-destruct, giving way to socialism. Schumpeter's valorization of "creative destruction"—and its protagonist hero, the entrepreneur—can be read as an effort to warrant capitalism's survival. A competitive individual with prodigious traits, the entrepreneur perpetually infuses uncertainty into the capitalist system, motivated by "the will to conquer: the impulse to fight, to prove oneself superior to others, to succeed for the sake, not of the fruits of success, but of success itself" (Schumpeter, 1934: 93).¹ Here, creative destruction is precisely the process by which the innovation of new products, services, and economic structures makes previous ones obsolete. The Schumpeterian entrepreneur does not compete within a market to satisfy demand, but invents new markets, changes the market's rules, and creates desires. The creative destruction he engages in dismantles structures *from within*, to consolidate—rather than overcome—capitalism.

Sitting in uneasy juxtaposition with Schumpeter's entrepreneur, is another destructive figure that had already emerged from the writings of Walter Benjamin. In contrast to capitalism's "creative destroyer," Benjamin's "destructive character" in his homonymous essay (1931)² refuses to attach a productive end to destruction. The destructive character is not a creator: "the only work he avoids is creative" (542). He destroys in order to clear the way, without a program for the future: "No moment can know what the next will bring" (542). Benjamin's destroyer carries the spirit of the avant-garde, posing as "barbarians storming the gates" of bourgeois capitalist culture from the outside or its margins (Vaneigem 1999, 20).³ Schumpeter's creative destroyer destroys in order to preserve and fortify a system that feeds on uncertainty, thereby precluding any alternative future. Benjamin's destroyer mobilizes destruction to open up possible futures. Destroying is not an end, but a means of undoing or derailing a fixed course to construct the redemptive possibility of the *otherwise*: an otherwise that could be located beyond capitalism. Benjamin's destroyer renounces

control over the future. Without an explicit political project, his destructive act is subject to misunderstandings. In fact, not only has he “no interest in being understood” but even

“provokes” misunderstanding, “just as oracles,” Benjamin writes, “those destructive institutions of the state, provoked it” (542).

Could Schumpeter’s destroyer stand as one of the possible ‘misunderstandings’ of Benjamin’s destructive modern oracle? Misunderstanding is a destructive act. As such, it can work to conserve someone’s worldview and eclipse difference, when one, for example, reads a text only to confirm what they want to see and already know; but it can also activate a text’s open, centrifugal character, by steering it towards unexpected futures. In the latter scenario, misunderstanding safeguards the possibility that a text does not remain identical to itself, but can have unexpected afterlives. Benjamin’s text takes that risk by being open to misunderstandings. By contrast, Schumpeter welcomes destruction as a means of preventing the ‘text’ of capitalism from being ‘misunderstood’ by a bureaucratic and managerial logic that ends up producing its other: socialism. His creative destroyer, the entrepreneur, restores and safeguards what he considers capitalism’s ‘correct’ reading—and its sole future.

When seen as a refusal to read a text the way it’s supposed to be understood: misunderstandings can produce difference. Today, one may ask whether the totalizing ‘text’ of neoliberal capitalism at all allows for the possibility of misunderstanding in that sense. How can we read *with* Schumpeter’s creative destruction, *against* him? How can we misunderstand creative destruction from ‘within’ not as a consolidation of capitalism, but a prefiguration of a radical ‘outside’? If Benjamin’s destroyer can destroy, knowing that there is still a potential “outside” position that can be occupied, in our neoliberal present, what would it take to *actively misread* a text of which we are part and by which we are written as subjects? The contemporary subject’s task might just be to seek ways of misunderstanding capitalism, by *actively misreading* this all-encompassing text we partake in, in the hope of weirding its premises and opening up spaces of difference from within.

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1. Schumpeter, J.A. (1934) *The Theory of Economic Development: An Inquiry Into Profits, Capital, Credit, Interest, and the Business Cycle*. New Jersey: Transaction. ↩
 2. Benjamin, W. (2005). *Selected Writings. Vol. 2, bk. 2, 1931–1934*. Ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. ↩
 3. Vaneigem, R. (1999). *A Cavalier History of Surrealism*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Edinburgh: AK Press. ↩

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