

Research Article

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The Capitalist Form of Life, and How To Deconstruct It¹

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2020-0012>

received December 20, 2019; accepted June 23, 2020

Abstract: The article sets out the thesis that the social-ontological account based on the form of life concept can be used to analytically and normatively reflect alternative economies and their attempt to overcome capitalistic structures.² To develop the thesis, I provide conceptual work on the “economic form of life”, pointing at its plasticity due to the general substitutability of economic practices. Against this background, I argue that Capitalism makes use of this plasticity to create a fully commodified, radical contingent form of life. Actors of alternative economies can wake up of from this dream world of Capitalism by using the substitutability of economic practices to deconstruct the capitalist form of life. The two most important practices for doing so are the practices of “in-sourcing” and “solidary out-sourcing”. They also reveal the normative kernel of conviviality, namely to seek to do justice to the economicity of human life. The paper ends with locating the presented form-of-life-account within the strand of literature on alternative economies.

Keywords: Capitalism, Critical Theory, Form of Life, Deconstruction, Conviviality

At the height of World War II, Friedrich Pollock, “the last unknown of the Frankfurt School” (Wiggershaus 750, my translation), published an article that sparked “a great debate” (Gangl 26) within the Institute for Social Research (cf. Postone, Gangl). Its title: *State Capitalism*. Its key message: The epoch of market economy is over. Capitalism is about to enter its next, totalitarian stadium, if we are not able to create a democratic alternative now (cf. Pollock). Pollock’s dramatic, even dystopic description of the totalitarian state capitalism was not meant to be an accurate piece of empirical research, but as a calculated exaggeration that rendered the tendencies of the present visible.³ Pollock fleshed out the form of life that capitalism ultimately would produce – a dystopic vision very much needed in a historical situation where every attempt to awake from the nightmare of World War II was welcome.

Pollock’s method of dystopic exaggeration to make visible the latent tendencies of the present, can be helpful to think critically about new forms of life today. Within the literature on conviviality it is a wildly shared assumption that the convivialist form of life cannot and should not be developed from scratch. All attempts to create a non-capitalistic way of life cannot but start inside capitalism. Alternative forms of life will not fall out of the sky, but must be developed on earth (cf. Gibson-Graham and Cameron and Healy; Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*). While J.K. Gibson-Graham concentrate on providing a new “language of economic difference” (Gibson-Graham xi) to describe the already existing, alternative economics, and E.O. Wright focuses on the positive utopian potential within Capitalism (cf. Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*), the form-of-life approach presented here, is guided by Pollock’s dystopic method. Imagining the

¹ I would like to thank Dr. Sibylle Schmidt and two anonymous reviewers for their comments on the manuscript of this paper, which helped me a lot to improve the argumentation and to clarify conceptual questions.

² Central ideas of this paper have been developed originally within a research project, conducted with Rahel Jaeggi on Critical Theories of the Economy, which included also a research seminar on solidarity economy in Berlin (cf. Ronge).

³ Franz Neumann, who later published his famous study *Behemoth* on Nazi Germany (cf. Neumann), turned out to be Pollock’s most decisive critic, arguing that Pollock’s approach neither matched empirical reality nor was in line with the Marxist framework.

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dystopic tendencies of Capitalism's form of life allows us to identify the practical starting points for its emancipatory transformation.

The paper starts with a social-ontological discussion of the notion of an *economic form of life* – which allows us to examine the dystopic tendencies of Capitalism in the second part of the paper. Capitalism dreams of a form of life, in which the subject focusses exclusively on what he or she can sell on the market, while he or she buys in all other economic goods and services from others. In this one-dimensional form of life, to borrow an expression of Herbert Marcuse, the subject calculates every action with regards to its *opportunity costs*: What is the price for taking this action considering the best alternative action I could take? Hence, the form of life becomes radical contingent: Nothing is given. Everything can be changed, if it turns out, that there is a more profitable use of it. Against this dystopic picture of a radical contingent form of life, I will turn in the third part to the key question of the paper, namely how actors of alternative economics can wake up from Capitalism's nightmarish dream world and establish an alternative, economic form of life. My answer will be that they must *deconstruct practically* the capitalist form of life, whereby the economic practice of “in-sourcing” and “solidary out-sourcing” are the most effective ones to transform our current form of life in direction of a convivialist way of living.⁴ The focus on the practices of deconstruction allows us to determine the normativity of conviviality. Working towards a convivial form of life means to try *to do justice* to the fact that we are bound up in economic relationships with each other. Doing justice to the matter of economicity is the challenge, or so I would like to argue in the fourth part of the paper, which the actors of alternative economies *should* meet to remain truthful to their desire to develop an alternative, non-capitalist form of life.

1 The Economic Form of Life

The concept of form of life plays a significant role in the Wittgensteinian as well as the Hegelian tradition of western philosophy and has been successfully actualized by different philosophers in recent years (cf. for example Laugier, *Care, The Ordinary, Forms of Life*; Laugier, *This is Us*; Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*). In the following, I would like to draw on the concept to elaborate the notion of an *economic form of life*. This notion helps not only to capture the dystopic tendencies of current Capitalism, but also to understand the practical deconstruction of Capitalism, which is done or should be done by actors of alternative economies.

Let us start with some clarifying remarks on the notion of form of life itself. A form of life can be defined as the assemblage of habituated patterns of social practices (cf. Jaeggi, “A Wide Concept of Economy”). These patterns, which conversely constitute a form of life, are themselves assemblages of single practices. Hence, all three relevant levels of social ontological description are covered: The concept of form of life allows to focus on the *macro level* (the level of form of life), the *meso level* (the level of practice patterns) and the *micro level* (the level of single practices). While some philosophers prefer to address the meso level with the notion of *form* (cf. Kertscher and Müller), I follow Rahel Jaeggi's as well as Theodor Schatzki's intuition to conceptualize this level as the result of bundling single practices. However, in contrast to Schatzki, who explains this bundling by referring to the notion of life⁵, I side with Jaeggi's neo-Hegelian approach that these patterns have an *immanent telos* (cf. Jaeggi, *Critique of Forms of Life*), because it provides conceptual advantages. Let's take an example: “Going shopping” can be described as a pattern of social practices, which belong to a particular form of life (let's say the capitalist one) and consists of various single practices – entering the shop, choosing a product, paying etc. No matter how these single social practices are realised in concrete, they must be realised in some ways to fulfil the immanent goal of “going shopping”, namely to bring some commodities home.

⁴ Gibson-Graham also put emphasis on the significance of deconstruction in their path breaking work “*The End of Capitalism*”. They consider it, however, primarily as a *theoretical act*, not as a *practice* (cf. Gibson-Graham, pp. 11-15).

⁵ “[T]wo practices are interconnected when life in one hangs together with life in another. This also holds for the bundling of practices that compose a social formation.” (Schatzki 200-201)

If I come home empty handed, I did not realise the telos of the social practice of going shopping, no matter, what my intentions have been or which reasons I give for explaining my empty shopping basket.⁶

Another important conceptual point is the irreducible heterogeneity of practice pattern. No matter how uniform the overall form of life is, the patterns of practices can never be homogeneous. This is to say: They can never consist only of one sort of practice. The economic practice pattern of “going shopping” entails not only economic practices (like choosing a product, paying), but also non-economic ones (entering the shop, talking to the cashier etc.). It is true, however, that the selection and performance of these non-economic practices depend on the dominant economic practices which make the practice pattern of “going shopping” an economic one.⁷ The dominant economic practices determine which non-economic practices are part of the practice pattern. If the supermarket manager decides to reduce the staff costs by introducing self-service checkouts, the non-economic practice of talking to the cashier will be deleted from the practice pattern of “going shopping”, without endangering the overall economic character and functional logic of the practice pattern.

The neo-Hegelian assumption of an immanent telos of practice patterns allows us to analyse practice pattern with regard to the question whether the practices involved are essential for realizing the overall telos of the practice or not. While the practice of “talking to the cashier” is contingent, that is not necessary for realising the telos of going shopping, the economic practices of choosing a product or paying cannot be eliminated without transforming the overall character of the practice pattern “going shopping”.

This description should not be misunderstood as the attempt to apply the traditional Marxist distinction between base and superstructure on the level of practice patterns. The relationship between the essential practices and the contingent practices within a given practice pattern is so complex that they should be described with the notion of *overdetermination*, as it was introduced by the French philosopher Louis Althusser (cf. Althusser). Even though the heterogeneous practices hinges upon each other and influence each other within a given practice pattern, the assumption of an immanent telos demands and allows to determine the structural significance, which the various practices have for the realisation and on-going reproduction of a practice pattern. Within an economic practice pattern, the economic practices will obviously be more important than the non-economic practices.

With this analysis in mind, we can move on to the macro level of form of life. It seems as if entire forms of life can be described in the same way. Forms of life must be considered as composed by irreducible heterogeneous elements. Even the most monolithic form of life – let’s take the religious form of life as an example – will always include some non-religious practices. Such a form of life will be dominated by religious practice patterns (like praying, confessing, fasting, etc.), which govern the selection and performance of non-religious practice patterns (like working or eating or sleeping). It is possible to eliminate numerous non-religious practice patterns (like for example: having sex), but even in the monk’s form of life there will be some non-religious practices pattern (like eating or sleeping) which cannot be eliminated without risking the reproduction of the form of life as such.⁸ These irreducible, non-religious practices will be, therefore, overwritten by religious practices to encapsulate them in a religious practice pattern. For example, by praying and singing before and after eating, the non-religious practice of eating will be integrated into a religious practice pattern.

This practical overwriting of non-reducible, heterogeneous practices can be so powerful that it becomes difficult to recognize them as being heterogeneous. This epistemic difficulty can be used, however, as an indication for the uniformity of the form of life in question. The more difficult it is for the inhabitants of a form of life to distinguish between dominant and non-dominant practice pattern within their form of life, the more monolithic the form of life. Against this background, the notorious difficulty to decide analytically whether a specific practice pattern is economic or not appears in a new light. The epistemic problem indicates the increasing uniformity of our form of life. Just as the monk’s life is dedicated to only one telos, namely to praise God, the current capitalistic form of life is dedicated to only one telos, namely to realize profit. And just as it is almost impossible to decide whether a practice pattern in the monk’s

⁶ Elder-Vass argues along the same lines by describing practices as “the product of social norms”, that means “standardized expectations about how we should behave” (99). The difference between Elder-Vass suggestion to think about practices as entailing “a tendency to act in a certain way” (99) and the proposal to ascribe an immanent telos to them, lies in the fact, that the tendency is based on the intentions of human agents, while the telos has an ontological foundation in its corresponding practice.

⁷ Describing the other practices, which are embedded within this economic practice pattern, as *non-economic* (instead of describing them as positively) accounts for the fact that they depend on the economic practices which play the governing role within the practice pattern.

⁸ For a thoughtful analysis of the monk’s form of life, cf. Agamben.

form of life is religious or not, it is almost impossible to decide whether a given practice pattern within our form of life is capitalistic or not.

Yet, the most unified form of life is still heterogeneous from a social ontological point of view. Like the monk's form of life will entail non-religious practices, Capitalism cannot get rid of all non-capitalistic practices, but must weave them into capitalist practice patterns. However, this also means, that the efficacy of the irreducible, non-dominant practices can never be zeroed. They can be overwritten efficiently, but they will never fully disappear.⁹ Most importantly, these practices can become the starting point for transforming the form of life they are part of. Their latent efficiency, which is objectively there, can be increased by the actors up to a point at which the supremacy of the dominant practice pattern and, therefore, the overall character of the form of life is called into question.¹⁰ One could imagine, for example, how the monk's religious form of life is transformed into a political one by increasing the irreducible, non-religious practice of talking to each other. The religious practice pattern is transformed into a political one (e.g. by discussing the order of monic life before eating), eventually calling into question the religious character of the form of life as a whole.¹¹ This kind of *categorical transformation* from a religious form of life into a political one is of course much more complex, since it must affect all the practice patterns which have structural significance for the form of life in question. The crucial point is, that it is possible to describe and explain the qualitative transformation of a form of life through the irreducible efficacy of the non-dominant practices, which are contained in every form of life, no matter how monolithic it is. This holds true for the capitalist form of life as well. In fact, the transformation of the capitalist form of life seems particularly easy, since economic forms of life allow some sort of non-categorical transformations, which other forms of life (like the religious one) do not allow.

What does this mean? Economic practices have the unique feature of being genuinely substitutable. The economic practice of selling can be substituted, for instance, by the economic practices of giving away or lending. The same holds true for the practice of buying, which can be replaced by the practice of borrowing. This general substitutability of economic practices throws a light on the specific *plasticity of economic forms of life*. The substitutable economic practices are functional equivalent to each other. Therefore, the economic forms of life can be the subject of qualitative, but non-categorical transformation. In other words: Due to the functional substitutability of economic practices, the capitalistic economic form of life can be qualitatively transformed without losing its overall character as being economic. It would be sufficient to substitute the dominant economic practices by alternative ones.

This social ontological insight into the plasticity of economic forms of life could be helpful to understand the specific dynamic nature of the modern form of life, which is an economic one, in contrast to traditional ones. What is more important here, it allows to reconsider the colonizing character of Capitalism and to describe its dystopic dream world.

2 Capitalisms' Dream World: A Radical Contingent Form of Life

The general substitutability of economic practices exposes the capitalistic form of life to the danger of being transformed radically. From the social ontological point of view sketched out above, it is easy to imagine that capitalistic key practices such as contract work or ownership are replaced by non-capitalistic practices like voluntary participation (as it is done in the case of peer production) or the practice of use (like it is done in the so-called Sharing Economy). The result would be a form of life which is still an economic one, conserving key institutions like labour and employment, but radically differs from the current capitalistic one.

The example of the Sharing Economy shows, however, that the general substitutability of economic practices is not only the starting point for deconstructing the current form of life, but also for its further capitalistic transformation.

⁹ The idea of "overwriting" allows to specify an argument, which Nancy Frasers has put forward in her rereading of Polanyi (cf. Fraser). She argues convincingly that Capitalism's attempt to colonize the non-commodifiable "necessarily triggers crises" (546). I would like to suggest that the notion of *overwriting* should be used to describe the ways, in which Capitalism takes hold on the non-commodifiable without triggering crises.

¹⁰ There are, in other words, objective as well as subjective conditions for transformation.

¹¹ The most efficient backstop against this danger was invented by the Carthusian: They are not allowed to communicate with each other under no circumstances.

Given all theoretical difficulties to come up with a definition of Capitalism, it seems uncontroversial that the capitalist system is characterized by markets and therefore, the *tendency of commodification*.

Many critical theorists have realized Capitalism's strive after the transformation of the social world in a way, that more and more parts of the social life are mediated by market transactions. I will not enter the different strands of this discussion, which extends from Marx' analysis of *primitive accumulation* over Rosa Luxemburg's theory of *Landnahme* and Karl Polanyi's account of *disembedding*, to Jürgen Habermas' famous diagnosis of the *colonisation of the lifeworld* and further. I just point out that any account which aims to draw an adequate picture of Capitalism's strife for commodification needs to draw the distinction between the capitalistic economy and the non-capitalistic economy (rather than using the concepts of economy and capitalism synonymously). It is a huge mistake, as Timothy Mitchell, Gibson-Graham, Elder-Vass and others have shown in their work, to share the "capitalocentric" (Gibson-Graham 6) view that the economic reality would be adequately grasped by the notion of market economy (cf. Gibson-Graham, Mitchell, Elder-Vass). The economy is much more comprehensive than the market economy. It is not only an empirical mistake to identify economy and market economy, but also a conceptual one. Without distinguishing clearly between the economy and the market, between non-capitalistic economic practices and capitalistic economic practices, there is no chance to grasp the colonizing character of Capitalism adequately. To be more precise: Habermas' thoughtful analyses of the system's colonization of the lifeworld (see especially 222-228) is one-sided, since it ignores the system's colonization of the economy. The first and main victim of Capitalism's colonization is not the lifeworld, but the economy itself (cf. Ronge 19; Jaeggi, *Replik-Replik* 458; Fraser and Jaeggi 79), namely those parts of the economy, which are not yet commodified. No matter, whether one describes this non-capitalistic economy by referring to Edward Thompson and his theory of *moral economy* (cf. Thompson) or by using Polanyi's account of *substantive economy* (cf. Polanyi) or in line with Mauss' analysis as a *gift economy* (cf. Mauss), the main point is that the non-capitalistic parts of the economy must be considered to get the full picture of Capitalism's colonizing tendency.

While the colonization of the lifeworld seems to be a one-way street, where the colonized parts of the lifeworld seem to be lost for all times (at least in Habermas' diagnosis), the colonisation of the economical remains always provisional. Economic practices like "preparing food", "cleaning", or "taking care" can be commodified by sourcing them out to the market, but they can also be de-commodified. If Capitalism would have a dream, it would fantasize about a form of life, in which *all* economic practices would be commodified and the economic subjects would have lost all memory on non-marketized economic practices. Capitalism's dream is to replace any form of economic autarky by cooperation, so that the economic subjects perform no other economic practices except the ones, which they sell on the market.¹² Such a life would fully be integrated within the market. The individuals would purchase everything on the market which they do not sell: they would pay someone for cooking, someone for standing in line at the box office, someone for take care of his kids, someone for sleeping and so on. In such a form of life, the individuals would not only unlearn even the most rudimentary economic practice (like preparing food, caring for oneself, etc.), but take any decision regarding the question, whether the concluding action increases or decreases their position on the market. Anything which reduces or hinders their market performance and the development of their (human) capital, would be avoided (sleeping, networking with economically non-valuable people etc.), while every action which has a positive effect on it would be embraced. The economic form of life Capitalism dreams of would be characterized by the highest possible degree of *contingency*. The subject would examine everything again and again, whether there is an alternative, economically more profitable use of it. Nothing would be necessary, except being alive.

In this dystopic picture two things become apparent. Firstly, that the fight against Capitalism's colonisation does not only mean to protect the non-economical (the lifeworld, the social etc.) as dualistic thinkers like Polanyi or Habermas maintain, but first and foremost the not-yet-commodified economical. Secondly, the key for transforming capitalism lies in the emancipatory use of the substitutability of economic practices. Actors of alternative economies can deconstruct the current, capitalist form of life by using the substitutability of economic practices to initiate a radical, non-categorical transformation. The struggle for a non-capitalistic form of life is, in other words, two folded. It entails the defensive act of protecting the lifeworld *and* the non-yet-commodified economy as well as the progressive act of deconstructing capitalistic practices. In the following I will focus on the latter, by discussing its two main practices, namely *in-sourcing* and *solidary out-sourcing*.

¹² The anti-capitalistic figure per se is, therefore, the hermit. That might explain the popularity of Thoreau's *Walden* in counterculture movements.

3 The Practical Work of Deconstruction: In-Sourcing and Solidary Out-Sourcing

The logic of capitalistic markets demands from its participants to follow the economic law of comparative advantages as discovered by Adam Smith. It is much more efficient to invest one's own labour power exclusively in producing the good or offer the service one has talent for (and barter all other needed goods or services on the market) instead of trying to produce everything by oneself. Hence, the practice of sourcing out is from outstanding structural significance for the capitalistic form of life. This means, by implication, that the economic practice of "sourcing in" would have a tremendous transformational impact on the current form of life. In fact, the "do-it-yourself" principle plays a very important role in forms of alternative economies. By solving economic problems on their own, actors of alternative economies increase their autarky and reduce the capitalistic character of their economic form of life significantly. This transformational strategy comes, however, at high costs. The opportunity costs of their economic activity rise drastically, so that many actors of alternative economies are unable to compete with conventional provider on the market. Hence, this strategy of *re-oikonomization* can be fully used only by actors whose economic existence does not depend on the market; either because they are free time enterprises, run by people who have at the same time a "real job" in the "real economy" or because they strive after complete autarky (like land communities), i.e. the full disintegration out of the market. For all actors, whose existence depend on market success – and these are the actors, which are most relevant for the question of transforming the current economy, since they compete with capitalistic market providers and possibly drive them out of the market – the deconstructive practice of sourcing-in has its limits. Pushing the limits of sourcing in too far means to go bankrupt sooner or later. Market-oriented actors of alternative economies can only source-in to a degree which allows them to stay in the market and to compete with conventional providers.

They must buy some goods and services on the market. This is the point, where *solidary outsourcing* comes in. This economic practice helps to avoid the problem of increased opportunity costs which comes with in-sourcing, without losing sight of the overall goal, namely to transform the capitalistic form of life. Now, if the actors of alternative economies manage to buy the goods and services they need by market participants which also belong to the network of alternative economies, the practice of solidary outsourcing is a powerful tool to increase the overall share of alternative economies on the market.

Under current conditions, the practice of solidary outsourcing is still very limited. Structures of alternative economies are much too weakly developed to provide all the sorts of economic goods and services which are needed to survive on capitalistic markets. This holds especially true for financial services like raising money or investing money. As long as the quantity and the quality of alternative economies are not sufficiently developed, it remains impossible to apply the transformative practice of solidary outsourcing all the way down of the production chain. The best thing alternative economy actors can do (and do) is to "overwrite" the unavoidable practice of (conventional) outsourcing with political practice patterns, like deciding democratically from which conventional provider they want to buy.

Let me sum up the line of thought so far: The transformation of the capitalistic form of life into a non-capitalistic form of life must be an economic transformation. It means that it must start and succeed under current market conditions. Alternative economic actors must be economically successful so that the share of alternative economic actors in the market increase while capitalistic actors are squeezed out of it. To make this happen, alternative economic actors should source-in as many economic practices as they can (without going out of business) and outsource solidary all other economic practices. This way, the actors of alternative economies replace key practices of the capitalist form of life, like commodification and outsourcing, and thus deconstruct the current form of life in an efficient way.

Certainly, there are other economic practices which can be substituted and are substituted in the context of alternative economy: The various kinds of borrowing stores, for instance, substitute the dominant practice of buying/selling with lending/borrowing. The actors of solidarity agriculture replace the dominate practice of consuming by the practice of presuming, where the consumers are actively integrated into processes of cultivation and harvesting, and so on. In all these cases, the actors of alternative economy use the substitutability of economic practices to do practical deconstructive work on the capitalist form of life. The practice of in-sourcing in combination with solidary outsourcing has probably the highest transformational impact, since it decreases the outreach of the capitalistic markets in general (by sourcing-in), while at the same time reducing its capitalistic character by strengthening the network of alternative economy via solidary outsourcing. This is the way, the current form of life can be deconstructed, bringing about a new,

alternative economic form of live. In the following, I aim to show, how this perspective allows us to reflect the normativity of the convivialist project as *doing justice*.

4 The Normativity of Conviviality: Doing Justice to the Economic Life

Usually the normativity of conviviality and alternative economies is reflected by values like solidarity, equality, participation or alike (cf. Wright, *Transforming Capitalism through Real Utopias*). Little is said about justice.¹³ This silence is somehow surprising, since justice plays an eminent role in normative reflections. Yet, the notion of justice is closely related to John Rawls' philosophy (cf. Rawls) and, hence, to the mainstream of political and moral philosophy, so that most theoreticians of alternative economies prefer to use alternative concepts. In the following I propose to adopt the concept of justice to reflect the normativity of conviviality, yet in an alternative, non-Rawlsian way. Instead, I draw on Jacques Derrida and his understanding of justice developed within the context of the philosophy of deconstruction to rethink the normative core of conviviality.

According to Derrida, the practice of deconstruction is grounded in the desire for justice (cf. Derrida), namely in the desire to treat something or someone in a way which is adequate to its being. This challenge of doing justice can, however, never fully be met. Since we always already recognize, address, and treat things and persons before the background of our purposes, our experiences and prejudices, we continuously fail to do justice to them. Derrida's philosophy can be understood as a meditation of this impossibility. The practice of deconstruction, postulated and performed by him, is the theoretical as well as practical attempt to do justice. It withstands final identifications, focusses again and again on the differences between the phenomena and our conceptual approach to them. The philosophy of deconstruction enables the subject, therefore, to make the experience of an impossible task: Doing justice needs to be done, but cannot be done.¹⁴ This impossibility, however, does not render deconstruction a useless or senseless enterprise. On the contrary, the experience of failure encourages the subject, Derrida argues, to insist even more on the task of doing justice (cf. 25-26).

This broad-brush outlook might be sufficient to sketch out the role, which justice can play for the normative reflection on conviviality. If the convivialist metamorphosis of the capitalistic form of life can be described as the outcome of deconstructive practices, as argued throughout the paper, the desire of doing justice – in the Derridian sense – is promising for capturing its normative core. Actors of alternative economies are driven by the desire of doing justice to the fact that they live an economic life. They want to create an economic form of life, which is just – not in terms of equality or distribution, but in terms of doing justice to the fact that we are economically connected in innumerable ways with each other and other living beings by the economic form of life we inhabit.¹⁵ Alternative economic practices can, therefore, not only be evaluated by the criteria whether they are non-capitalistic or not, whether they are transformative or not, but also with respect to the question, whether they try to do justice to the economicity of life. The desire of finding the *just economic form of life* can and should be ascribed as the key normative underbelly of all convivialist projects. The decisive point is not, however, whether the convivialist projects can realize this goal or not. On the contrary: As we learn from Derrida, the question of goal attainment is not important and should neither inform our normative reflection of convivialist projects, nor the self-understanding of the actors involved. So long as their economic practices aim at doing justice to the economicity of their life, so long as they create thereby the “experience of the impossible” (Derrida 15), they should be acknowledged as normatively justified and emancipatory. The way in which the convivialist actors respond to this experience of impossibility – which “no polity can fully capture, while it is at work inside every polity” (Menke 286, my translation) – reveals whether they keep on working towards an alternative form of life or have been co-optated by Capitalism. Only the actors which are willing and able to preserve the experience of the impossible should be acknowledged as full members of the convivialist project, since *sticking to the desire*, to use a Lacanian phrase (cf. Lacan), is the only guarantee of not becoming capitalist again.

¹³ An exception to the rule is Eric Olin Wrights project of Envisioning Real Utopias, which is based on a “radical democratic egalitarian understanding of justice” (12).

¹⁴ The proximity to Adorno's philosophy of negative dialectics is obvious, see for example Angehrn 288-291.

¹⁵ While Schatzki's attempt to explain the bundling of social practices by referring to the notion of life seems to be conceptually unsatisfying (cf. FN 4), his considerations (cf. 198-209) might be helpful to explore this aspect of economic interdependence between living beings.

5 Concluding Remarks

Given the explorative and programmatic character of the article, it seems to be reasonable to use the final part not for resuming the argument, but for locating the form of life-approach presented here within the broader picture of conviviality research. Most of the research literature is associated to one of the two dominating theoretical strands: On the one hand there is the *diverse economy approach*, elaborated by Gibson-Graham, which has many followers in the field. On the other hand, there is the *gift economy account*, which draws on Mauss influential study of the gift economy to conceptualize and evaluate alternative economies. The form of life-account proposed here – which has strong affinities to the approach Rahel Jaeggi has developed and recently used to rethink economy in the tradition of Critical Theory (cf. Jaeggi, “A Wide Concept of Economy”; Fraser and Jaeggi 136-164) – sides with the two mentioned strands in various important respects. With Gibson-Graham’s account, it has in common the claim for a new conceptualization of the economy and the conviction that the differentiation between *the economy* and *the market* is crucial for being able to theorize adequately about alternative economies. There are also, however, two significant differences. First, and foremost, the form of life account advocated here, argues on the level of social ontology. It does not want to construct “a new languages of economic diversity” (Gibson-Graham 56) to change the *discourse*, but to provide concepts and distinctions which grasp social reality as it is. Such a social ontological claim is also made by the advocates of a “gift economy”-account. Sociologists like Frank Adloff (Adloff) or Dave Elder-Vass (Elder-Vass) take social practices also as the minimum unit to build a social theory, which allows to describe and to analyze sociality from an external, theoretical standpoint. Different from Gibson-Graham, who wants the immediate experiences of the alternative economies actors to be the starting point of theorisation, the representatives of the gift-economy approach advocate the primacy of theory. The form-of-life account presented here, sides in between these positions. On the one hand, it fully agrees with Gibson-Graham that any critical theory must provide concepts, with which the actors can understand their experiences in a new, emancipatory way. On the one hand, it shares the conviction that these emancipatory concepts cannot be elaborated by redoubling the subject’s experience in the realm of theory, but only by following the immanent dynamic of conceptual work. This speculative way only admits to come up with a theoretical framework, which enables us to distinguish between emancipatory forms of alternative economies and their regressive look-alikes (like national land communities). Theories rooted in the “gift-economy” tradition are also able to draw such critical distinctions. The crucial difference to the form-of-life account lies in the fact that their analysis and evaluation tends to focus on single economic practices and, therefore, blind out that practices are always already part of forms of life. To put it another way: The gift economy account tends to treat any given practice as transformative, overlooking that its anti-capitalistic character depends on the overarching form of life they are part of. Giving practices are not anti-capitalist as such, as many examples of the so-called Share Economy (like AirBnB) show. Their emancipatory effect depends on the practice pattern and the form of life they are embedded in. Without a macro-concept like form of life, the “gift economy” approach is endangered to become positivistic, advocating an ahistorical social ontology. Due to the anthropological and ethnographical background of their theory, the proponents of the gift-economy-approach tend to treat giving practices as part of some deep economy, which lies beyond the market economy. The form-of-life account, as it is presented here, rejects such an essentializing view. The non-capitalistic parts of the economy are not non-capitalistic, because they originate from some other, substantial economy, but because they are not-yet-commodified. The social ontology, the form of life account strives for, does not work with ahistorical categories (like the gift-economy approach), but tries to elaborate concepts, which can reflect the historicity of the economic form of life we inhabit.

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