

# Allegories of Capital

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**nowt press**

On the 19th of December 2013 agreements were signed by EU ministers to further separate the State and the banks' obligations so as to prevent a repeat of the impacts of the 2008 bank crash.<sup>1</sup> Of course the Eurozone cannot fully protect itself from – and needs to welcome – the permeability and appetite of capital flows, hence the 'complex' nature of the agreements, which took two years to reach. The same week Ian Buruma commented, 'The borderless economy must become more equitable to temper growing inequalities and to shield the vulnerable from global market forces.'<sup>2</sup>

A recent news story reports the unearthing of human remains in Farringdon, during an excavation for London's Crossrail project. Dated to circa 1340 the bones, after DNA testing, were found to be carrying *Yersinia Pestis* the pathogen responsible for the bacterium causing the Black Death. Charterhouse Square, where the skeletons were found, was known as 'no-mans land' and was one of the poorest areas outside the boundary wall of the City of London. Bodies from the City were often dumped outside the walls at the height of the pandemic. The plague was brought to London during a time of expansion in international and global trade. Fleas feeding on infested rats from central Asia and China were carried to Europe in merchant ships from the Crimea, terminus of the Silk Road. In the wake of the aftermath a cataclysmic upheaval occurs in religion, society and the economy bringing a concomitant of blame, retribution and persecution of minorities: foreigners, beggars and those indentified as peripheral to medieval society.

Around 1342 the painter Ambrogio Lorenzetti finished the fresco *An allegory of good and bad government* for the town hall of the city-state of Siena. He shows us the results of the respective regimes in the fabric of the city and the fabric of the countryside. The good brings pattern and order, while the bad results in the destruction of pattern,

particularly visceral in the countryside where the husbandry has failed animals and crops and the very trees and hillsides, even into the colour of the sky, a terrible blue abrasion.

In Du Marsais' handbook of 1730 on the tropes of language, he says in the section on allegory: 'Often the ancients explained with a fabulous story the natural effects whose causes they were ignorant of; and in turn allegorical meanings were given to these stories.'<sup>3</sup> '...whose causes they were ignorant of': for Lorenzetti, and an emergent renaissance understanding causes clearly end up with nature but their source and responsibility lie in human decisions.

The potential hubris of such decisions in the symbolic fabric of the city can be seen in a series of paintings by Thomas Cole (1801 – 48), *The Course of Empire*, reproduced as part of a visual complement in Angus Fletcher's *Allegory*,<sup>4</sup> Number III in the series, *Consummation* shows a city replete with utterly self-confident façades and statues as if it will stand forever in a beneficent light.

The limits of social understanding, and the business of interpretation, this time historical in the modern era, are addressed at length by Frederic Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*.<sup>5</sup> A fundamental cause of bewilderment for us is the structuring and de-structuring continuing to be produced by capital. After thinking through this with the help of philosophers, he comes to the insights from psychoanalysis, which he also wants to situate with our modernity:

The conditions of possibility of psychoanalysis become visible, one would imagine, only when you begin to appreciate the extent of psychic fragmentation since the beginnings of capitalism, with its systematic quantification and rationalization of experience, its instrumental reorganization of the subject just as much as of the outside world.<sup>6</sup>

Lorenzetti, splitting reality into at least two options, schematic perhaps, instances our very human figural relation to experience because our understanding and ability to interpret is always partial, a certain horizon. It seems capital operates as if it does not have a figural relationship to values, that it observes no walls, has no concern for pattern.

## Notes

1 Philippe Ricard, 'L'union bancaire, un accord complexe mais décisif pour la zone euro', *Eco & Entreprise, Le Monde*, 20/12/2013, pp. 1-3.

2 Ian Buruma, 'Global forces are uniting populists against the elites', *Financial Times*, 14/12/2013, p.11.

3 *Du Marsais Des Tropes ou Des Diférens Sens Dans Lesquels on peut prendre un même mot dans une même langue* p.185, Paris: Chez les Libraires associés, 3rd. ed., 1776, Robert Galeta, trans.

4 Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of Symbolic Mode*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1964.

5 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, London and New York: Routledge, 1983.

6 op.cit. p.47.