



Journal for Cultural Research

ISSN: 1479-7585 (Print) 1740-1666 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcuv20>

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To cite this article: Alyson Cole & Estelle Ferrarese (2018) How capitalism forms our lives, Journal for Cultural Research, 22:2, 105-112, DOI: [10.1080/14797585.2018.1461597](https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2018.1461597)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2018.1461597>



Published online: 24 May 2018.



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How capitalism forms our lives

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Even before ‘economic precarity’ became the default explanation for the rise of defensive nationalism globally, scholars had already begun returning to ground their work in the economy and materiality more generally. This shift is evident across disciplines, from the expanding field of ‘critical economics,’ to the popularity of ‘capitalism studies,’ the emergence of ‘neomaterialism,’ and the revived interest in Frankfurt school thinkers and even Karl Marx himself, to the push back against the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ and Foucauldian analyses of power. Despite this renewed attention, the question remains: ‘the economy’ in what sense?

The idea that capitalism is more than an economic system, and instead, as Marx first framed it, a ‘definite mode of life’ that shapes our relationships with others, our sense of ourselves and our capacities, practices, and actions in the material world, should be rather obvious. Yet efforts – whether through criticism or policy remedies – to redress the vast inequalities, inherent exploitation, reification and alienation, to say nothing of the manifold destructive effects of capitalism on the environment, typically proceed without grappling fully with the entwinement of the economic with the social and cultural, much less the political, ethical, ontological, and phenomenological. It seems, therefore, that we require new heuristics to comprehend capitalism broadly and deeply, to investigate and further define the work of capital on these multiple registers simultaneously.

In this special issue of the *Journal of Culture Research*, we propose ‘form of life’ as a possible heuristic. Rather than replace one emphasis (e.g. the discursive) with another (e.g. the material), the concept of a ‘form of life’ presumes all facets of life are inherently interwoven, bypassing distinctions between discourse, bodies, language, and materiality. It thus enables scholars to incorporate the diverse aspects of life in their analysis, to investigate the effects of capitalism holistically and at a range of scales. While the contributions in this volume vary in their focus and align with different theoretical approaches and methodologies, all provide meditations on the scope, contours, and content of capitalism as a form of life.

The concept ‘form of life’ comes from the German ‘*Lebensform*.’ In the German language, there is another semantically similar word that conjures a rather different meaning, ‘*Lebensweise*,’ often translated as a ‘way of life’ or a ‘lifestyle.’ Unlike a lifestyle (*Lebensweise*), about which we presume we make purposeful choices, a ‘form of life’ (*Lebensform*), as Ludwig Wittgenstein clarifies, is part of ‘natural history ... which no one has doubted, but which have escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes’ (1968, p. 415). Hanna

Pitkin, who considers the concept both richly suggestive and frustratingly enigmatic, concisely explicates Wittgenstein's account:

Human life as we live it and observe it is not just a random, continuous flow, but displays recurrent patterns, regularities, characteristic ways of doing and being, of feeling and acting, of speaking and interacting. Because they are patterns, regularities, configurations, Wittgenstein calls them *forms*; and because they are patterns in the fabric of human existence and activity on earth, he calls them forms of life. (1973, p. 132)

While Wittgenstein's formulation of 'meaning is use' is credited as among the earliest theorizations of the concept, references to 'forms of life' abound in the Frankfurt School's critical theory and some branches of anthropology (such as the work of Veena Das and Didier Fassin), as well as in the writings of Stanley Cavell, and even the late Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben adopted the concept. Given these diverse applications, seeking a unified meaning would be tricky, and to do so might flatten the concept and the important work it performs in these different contexts. Certainly the social ontology on which the idea of a form of life is built, whether or not this is explicitly defined, diverges from one school of thought to the next. Nevertheless, we propose that the polyphonic topicality this concept currently enjoys is significant: some shared traits exist across these traditions that, through the 'form of life' framing, enable us to grasp phenomena that might otherwise remain illegible.

What is a 'form of life'?

Despite varied uses and inflections, at least four characteristics of a 'form of life' can be traced in most theories drawing upon the concept.

- (1) A form of life is not constituted by its content; that is, by some specific combination of features. Instead, it is compromised of the configuration established by the arrangement of features *among* themselves.

A form of life always involves a series of *practices*, and the *work* of sustaining those practices. The concept refers to an assemblage that is 'continually engendered by its own *manner*,' to take one of Agamben's recurrent formulations. The category of 'use' is frequently employed in this context. In Agamben's writings in particular, 'use' designates a human activity that cannot be reduced to either production (it is not manifested in particular modes of labor and there is no end product per se), or praxis (because acting well is not in itself the end). The point is to engage the world, one's body, and so forth, in a manner in which there is no a priori project, principle, or intention being purposefully actualized. As practices, forms of life are configurations of human coexistence, and thus continually reproduced and modified; rendering them malleable, even destructible.

- (2) The notion of a 'form of life' always refers to a *sedimentation* – of ideas, meanings, or ethical content. 'Form of life' describes the gradual aggregation of meaning-laden practices that are, in the course of this process, increasingly made unavailable; that is, rendered inaccessible to simple challenge. A form of life is, therefore, that which establishes or imposes itself, and thereby commands.

This deposit or residue is primarily ethical in nature. Forms of life impregnate the relationships we have to one another, our material world, and therefore ourselves; they constitute the basis of any conceivable idea of the good life.

Theorists who use the concept of a 'form of life' characterise such sedimentation as the residue of past commitments, which then become ossified in institutions and in things. But the expectations that have shaped them continue to linger – a claim lies within them. At the same time, a form of life never appears as a pure obligation or constraint, or even as a simple convention. In Wittgenstein's terms, a 'form of life' is foremost a type of agreement, an 'agreement in judgments' that are necessary for collective life. As Cavell cautions, however, we should not understand this agreement as 'some kind of contract or an implicitly or explicitly agreed upon set of rules' (1989, p. 41). A form of life does not result from a regulated, consensual protocol, whether individual or collective. The agreement is tacit, coinciding with the form itself.

A form of life is, then, always a proposition, a proposal of meaning. This is where politics enters, in particular a politics that refuses this proposition of solidified meaning, that seeks to challenge what is presented as given. Critical theorists, for example, maintain that forms of life have a claim to rationality or validity embedded within them. This claim makes criticising a form of life possible; it is what enables us to evaluate its rationality and validity. As propositions of meaning that deposit themselves and remain in institutions, subjectivities, and daily objects, forms of life respond to the question of 'how we ought to live.' Because they typically respond poorly, they *enable and oblige critique*. Employing the concept of a 'form of life' allows us to investigate and evaluate how we live. It thereby opens the possibility to reflect on how we would like to live and, as importantly, provides the perspective to consider how our form of life delimits or forecloses certain prospects by excluding other forms of life. Put simply, 'form of life' as a heuristic enables us to examine the taken for granted, to break with the comfort of the familiar.

- (3) Forms of life have ethical textures. To speak of a 'form of life' thus presumes a concreteness or materiality to political and moral life.

The concept 'form of life' includes affective dispositions and orientations, as well as gestures, facial expressions, and bodily modes of intersubjectivity. The syntagm extends to the idea that there is a properly embodied form of life, which Theodor Adorno sums up in the notion of the 'physiognomy' of the capitalist form of life. A form of life also sediments in legal systems, in modes of kinship, architecture, fashion, and everyday objects. The world in which we engage and perform our moral acts is also a material and institutional arrangement, one that conditions our actions and our life possibilities. This is the core reasoning underpinning *Minima Moralia*. Like Walter Benjamin, Adorno also reminds us that forms of thought are entangled with the most banal objects; such objects bear myths, or incarnate them. And, conversely, they shape and mediate our moral gestures. Using the example of the development of doors in bourgeois interiors, Adorno highlights how self-closing doors permit the person arriving to enter the room uninvited, so that tact and thoughtfulness cannot be rightly understood without also accounting for the door that should be closed quietly (2006, p. 40). As Rahel Jaeggi (2005) subsequently argued, reasoning in terms of 'forms of life' casts the questions of 'how we ought to act' as integrally tied to the prior question of 'what makes us act;' that is, to reflecting on how each social formation has a material reality.

- (4) The notion of 'form of life' always seeks to grasp the articulation of the 'social' and the 'vital' on which the institutions of the human world rest.

Identifying human beings as *living beings*, i.e., mortal, sexual beings, lies at the core of the idea of a 'form of life.' It therefore entails reflecting on physiological constitutions, vital

processes, and the reproduction of life, including non-human living beings. All theories of forms of life presume that life is lived through the infinite prism of historically produced forms of life, but the concept is not attached to any particular moral or political reasoning or functionalist materialism. It reflects instead a social relation between the living and culture, their embodiment and environment. It thus reveals how the vulnerability of our lives is intrinsically both social and biological, and how human vulnerability cannot be apprehended separately from the vulnerability of non-human lives.

From this perspective, bodies appear as always shaped by practices and, simultaneously, as constituting the materiality that holds and constrains forms of life. Veena Das, for example, has shown in her ethnographic fieldwork on violence in post-partition India how women's bodies repaired a collective form of life, brutally damaged by rape and murder, by swallowing and containing the 'poisonous knowledge' of violence (2007, pp. 59–78). By understanding the political subject as a living being, theories of forms of life consequently require rethinking concepts such as the ordinary and the common, singularity, powerlessness and agency, and politics itself. Such theoretical commitments are especially important for political reflection. The idea of 'forms of life' precludes the possibility of any functional separation between human reproduction and production, thus undermining clear-cut distinctions between the private, social, economic, and political; since all these activities must be seen in terms of their effect on the possibility of human life, the distinctive form that they contribute to making.

Capitalism as a 'form of life'

The essays in this volume attempt to rethink capitalism, its mechanisms, and its effects on our bodies and on our common life. Each essay elaborates central correlates of the concept 'form of life,' whether or not the author explicitly uses the expression. The premise the authors implicitly share is that by redefining capitalism as a form of life, it can be analyzed as a social practice, rather than as a system radically distinct from the cultural, social, political or even biological. When economics is conceived as a discrete activity or sphere, the reciprocal impact of the economy on our lives and our lives on the economy recedes to the background: it appears as isolated and autonomous, a function of instrumental rationality or the market. By emphasising economic *practices*, the notion of a 'form of life' opens productive new ways of conceiving of 'the economic' as an integral and integrated dimension of life, and thus renews possibilities for critique. In turn, regarding human beings as 'economic bios' reveals the plasticity of our economic form of life and its biological and cultural aspects, providing a needed alternative to analyses that position neoliberalism as an economic logic imposed upon the social and cultural, occluding how other areas of life are always intertwined with the economic, though not completely subsumed by it.

We open this volume with Max Horkheimer's inaugural address delivered when he assumed the position of Director of the Frankfurt Institute in 1931, 'The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research.' While this lecture has been published in English before, we were surprised to discover how Horkheimer's uses and inflections of the words '*Leben*' and '*Lebensform*' are erased in the available translations. In the version included here, we have restored the meaning of '*Lebensform*' thus amplifying Horkheimer's effort to incite social philosophy in general, and critical theory in particular, to examine humans as producers of their historical forms of life. Not all of the authors in this

volume draw from critical theory, but each contribution in its own way assumes the ground Horkheimer set forth when he insisted upon the study of comprehensive forms of life in contrast to the 'transfiguring' of metaphysics, on the one hand, and the positivism, scientism, formulaic rationalism and 'chaotic specialization,' on the other.

In her short intervention, 'Economy as Social Practices,' Rahel Jaeggi emphasises that capitalism can only be rightly understood when the economy is analyzed as 'bundle of practices.' She argues that the market and the economy in general must be viewed as subtended by practices endowed with their own normativity. The capitalist form of life, accordingly, results from ethical sedimentation even as it presents itself as ethically neutral.

For Agamben, a form of life cannot, by definition, be capitalist, since capitalism smothers the possibility of all life. In 'The Use of Bodies,' Estelle Ferrarese probes Agamben's effort to imagine a form of life realised through a particular form of 'use,' as a non-instrumental mode of acting, and a withdrawal from the system of power which law organises, namely sovereignty. He presents 'use' and 'law' as incompatible because their respective relationships to bodies cannot be reconciled. Despite a promising focus on embodiment, however, Ferrarese argues that Agamben fails to formulate a critique of the capitalist form of life that adequately addresses the perspective of the living body.

The capitalist form of life responds, as do all forms of life, to the question of knowing how we ought to live, and, according to the Marxian tradition, especially from György Lukacs forward, its response becomes sedimented as a kind of second nature. In Lukacs's formulation this petrification (he depicts it as a 'charnel-house of long-dead interiorities') makes it possible to account for the phenomenon of alienation – 'a complex of meanings, which has become rigid and strange' (1971, p. 64). This proposition of meaning, the capitalist form of life, may also be refuted and contested. Placing accumulation by dispossession at the core of his analysis of capitalism, David Harvey's scholarship has always been distinguished by the attention he devotes to capitalism's impact on life, both human and non-human. He consistently shows how a permanent mechanism for pillaging resources and destroying cultures doubles the logic of capitalist exploitation of labor. In his essay for this volume, 'Universal Alienation,' Harvey examines the second nature engendered by this dynamic. The concept of 'alienation' he employs to describe a process exceeding the dispossession of the self and the world, disempowerment, and the affective state of living an alien life, to reveal apathy. Attentive to new commodity chains, the role of value creation, and the replacement of productive capital by financial capital as the driving force of contemporary global and national capitalism, the essay introduces the idea of the trap of 'debt peonage,' which renders all plans for reforming or overthrowing capitalism unaffordable, even unthinkable. This is especially true, he notes, for the intellectual/academic class that is responsible for such plans, but that dare not imperil its major current or prospective source of income – pensions.

What may be inconceivable for precariously privileged intellectuals is the imperative of existence for others. Having spent her illustrious career documenting and combating the disciplining of the poor, Frances Fox Piven's 'The Enduring Regulation of the Poor' exposes how inequality is sedimented in government institutions and policy innovations within the capitalist form of life. She provides a succinct review of how purported efforts to help the poor in fact serve to keep them in poverty and insulate the political process from their existential challenges through which they might alter their lives. Disruptive politics from below has been critical to spurring change at various historical junctures. But Fox Piven traces the steady decline of the policies and infrastructures that have historically supported these

movements – dismantled systematically to preserve and sustain capitalism, regardless of the lives left in waste.

In ‘Governmentality, Subjectivity, and the Capitalist Form of Life,’ Daniele Lorenzini adopts a Foucauldian perspective on how the capitalist form of life imposes itself on the subject. If neoliberalism gives shape to our lives by producing particular subjectivities, these are governed less through the manufacturing of a second nature than by the freedom afforded to subjects. But Foucault also conceives of the form of life as an individual ‘uninterrupted practice’ that enables access to oneself, and posits the ethical necessity of the subject experiencing her truth at the cost of scandal. In addressing both meanings, Lorenzini’s essay outlines the possible ethical conflict between a collective (neoliberal) form of life and a singular form of life realised by the care of the self.

By conceiving of capitalism as a form of life we also view it as a material reality, that is, we grasp it *from* its materiality. Doing so makes it possible to account for how the capitalist form of life produces subjectivities, the social links, forms of thought, and the bodies it requires without recourse to, at least not principally, psychological and ideological motifs. According to Adorno, our form of life, the capitalist form of life, invites a radical diagnosis about the moral life that it shapes, as well as about the critique that it suggests: it makes every life a ‘specimen’ that only encounters and is only capable of a ‘bourgeois coldness,’ neutralising critique by presenting itself as given and necessary. This occurs, first, through the generalisation of the exchange-form, which has become the universal form determining all manifestations of life, subjective as well as objective. When he endeavors to shed light on the social causes of bourgeois coldness, Adorno’s reflection bears on a generalised and constraining form, rather than on a mystifying discourse or a set of false representations that would compel human beings to adopt attitudes that serve the reproduction of the capitalist order. Indeed, he writes that ‘what [individuals] are for themselves, what they think they are is secondary’ (1998, p. 248). The idea of internalising norms or models is grossly mistaken because there is no ‘stable subjectivity’ of the individual in the capitalist form of life (270). The form transmitted by technologies, commodities, market devices, and mass-medias, replaces it by imposing a reciprocal instrumentalization.

In ‘The Subject of Objects,’ Alyson Cole reflects on the materiality of our form of life, its ideological consequences, and the current rise of neomaterialism. Elaborating on Marx’s conception of the commodity form, she shows that endowing inanimate objects with agency – which neomaterialists presume is their contribution – is precisely a feature of the capitalist form of life. In this regard, she raises crucial questions about the politics of new materialism. As Cole writes, ‘the trouble with commodification is less the perversion of the bios than the birth of an alternative and distinctly nonhuman form of life.’

In a similar vein, Victoria Hattam’s ‘The Whiteness of Capital’ traces the hidden transnational mobility of capital, not only through commodity chains but also spatially at the geographic divide between the United States and Mexico. Hattam reveals that this movement is neither obvious nor natural, but continuously performed by political *dispositifs* obscured by politicians’ focus on walls and borders. The current preoccupation with the trafficking of bodies and the correlating attempt to curb that flow, she counsels, distracts from the more important movement of capital itself.

Cedric Johnson’s intervention considers how the capitalist form of life polices bodies in another context, the rise and expansion of the carceral state and the entwinement of capitalist property with criminality. ‘Beyond the Barricades’ reflects on how race and racism serve

as proxies for both perceiving and redressing inequality in America. Johnson charts the ossification of this racialized framing, a different kind of sedimentation, as a displacement of the economic, thus asking readers to examine the racialized inflections in the capitalist form of life and the place of a critique of capitalism in activism coalescing around 'Black Lives Matter.'

Marx suggests that we think of the form of life as the shape that life takes under certain modes of production. From this perspective, the capitalist form of life is created and reproduced in an attempt to meet needs; it results from the social production of the means of subsistence and from the material activity that is part of social production and the reproduction of life, absorbing the social relations of work in their somatic aspects, and embedding in objects. While it is impossible to separate production and human reproduction, the capitalist form of life dissimulates this impossibility, continually separating the inorganic from the organic, all the better to turn them inside out and conceal them in one another. The aim of Timothée Haug's essay, 'The Capitalist Metabolism,' is to expose this paradoxical mechanism. Haug deploys the metaphor of metabolic processes to revisit Marx's analysis of capitalism as both a mode of production and a form of life, drawing on feminist and ecological criticism. He argues that even as capitalism relies on the reproduction of life (i.e. on non-waged activities, the daily species production performed by women or other gendered workers) it is unable to account for that dependence within the dominant value form. An empirical gap remains among the purchasing and consumptive practices mediating care-work, and these mediations exist within capitalism, but escape commodification.

In the aggregate, the articles in this volume offer a fresh approach to contemporary treatises on how capitalism forms and deforms our lives. Sharon Holland's contribution, 'Vocabularies of Vulnerability,' employs the category of 'forms of life' to address explicitly the connection between human and non-human life, and their respective vulnerabilities. By highlighting issues of language, she also demonstrates that vulnerability appears only insofar as it can exist within a horizon of obligations (irrespective to whether they are fulfilled) and of normative reasoning, and how these constructions are racialized in the United States.

All of the essays – both the short interventions and the longer articles – push capitalism studies to engage with questions that preoccupy scholars of vulnerability. Many theorists today avoid the question of vulnerability, or rush to classify it under the rubric of 'risk.' In doing so they restrict vulnerability to calculations of probability and costs, occluding the ubiquity of vulnerability in the capitalist form of life. Instead we trace the social production of vulnerable lives in their ordinariness, in language, in interactions, and in processes of material sedimentation, as vulnerability persists through the unreflective acceptance of circumstances that are taken as given. We thus invite further investigation into the connection between the defeasibility of the very *forms* of our lives and the vulnerability of *the* human form of life, providing generative possibilities for rethinking and redressing economic precarity as one among other types of vulnerabilities. At the same time, and precisely through this prism, we aim to amplify how forms of life may be critiqued, and thereby wrestled open to needed transformation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Her books include: *Vulnerability*, Brill, 2018 (forthcoming), *La fragilité du souci des autres*. Adorno et le care, Paris, Editions de l'ENS, 2018, *The Politics of Vulnerability* (ed.), Routledge, 2017 ; *Ethique et politique de l'espace public*. Habermas et la discussion, Paris, Vrin, 2015 ; She is also the author of numerous articles on Critical Theory, deliberative democracy, and vulnerability as a political category.

Alyson Cole is a professor of Political Science, Women's & Gender Studies, and American Studies at Queens College and the Graduate Center, CUNY. Her research and teaching bridge political theory and American politics/culture, linking central questions of political thought—especially formulations of justice, the nature of vulnerability, precarity and subjugation, and the possibility of resistance or change—with an examination of ideology, rhetoric, and law. Cole is the author of *The Cult of True Victimhood: From the War on Welfare to the War on Terror* (Stanford University Press), as well as numerous articles in journals such as *Signs*, *American Studies*, *Gender, Work & Organization*, and *Critical Horizons*. Co-editor of *philoSOPHIA: A Journal of Continental Feminism*, and a principal scholar in the "Vulnerable & Dynamic Forms of Life" International Network of Research, Cole also serves as Executive Officer of the PhD/MA Program in Political Science at the Graduate Center.

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