

# The De-symbolized World

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**Dany-Robert Dufour, *The Art of Shrinking Heads: On the New Service of the Liberated in the Age of Total Capitalism*, trans. D. Macey, Polity Press, 2008.**

It is not often that critics of neoliberal economics begin by arguing that the logic of capitalism works too well. Yet the arguments of French philosopher Dany-Robert Dufour in *The Art of Shrinking Heads* depend critically on this premise.

Here is a *précis* of Dufour's argument: The logic of neoliberal capitalism operates by giving objects a new status that effectually divorces them from the symbolic meaning(s) they may have formerly held. As de-symbolized objects, goods circulate apart from any cultural components or agreement regarding human values. This redefinition eventually pervades conscious and non-conscious human actions as we transform ourselves to adapt to commodities as the *sine qua non* of social reality. However, this logic of reassigning objects a new status has now proved too effective in the sense that it has undermined the symbolic resources that individual subjects previously used to orient both rational choices in accordance with broader life projects. Hence the rational subject of neoliberal theory faces extinction. The thesis is that the de-symbolization of objects means that the self, as an agent theoretically able to make the types of decisions upon which economic transactions are premised (utility calculations of means vs. ends and net gains, etc.), finds no grounding for comparing use or exchange values with widely shared cultural goods.

Dufour's argument shares similarities with Polanyi's "double movement" thesis and Habermas' concern about the "rationalization of the lifeworld" except that it is applied internally to the human subject and, more specifically, the notion of the Subject constructed in modernity. For Dufour, one of the defining features of the modern Subject has been its relationship to the Other. Specifically, Dufour argues that it is the Other that the modern Subject has literally been subjected to. For Dufour, the relationship between the Subject and the Other was expressed through cultural symbols that provided a temporal and spatial framework that individuals were subject to for the coordination and execution of their life projects. He begins by considering Kant's critical Subject, which was subject to the constraints and limits of Reason for defining the extent and limits of freedom and experience. Dufour's concern with what neoliberal logic portends internally for the Subject leads him to also take up Freudian thought as an archetype of the modern psyche and the psychological counterpart to Kant's critical subject. Within the Freudian psyche the construction of myths, social status, and sexuality all served a symbolical role as norms for modern society.

The symbolic role of the critical and psychological Subjects of Kant and Freud erode in post-modernity. This erosion leaves the post-modern subject without a spatial or temporal framework as cultural symbols are removed, and, consequently, the gap between the Subject and the Other closes. Moreover, without the symbolic resources of modernity, the elements necessary for the foundational narratives previously used to orient modern society are not available. The upshot of this process is that whereas symbols once delimited the spatial and temporal categories of objects that could be given economic value, their removal leaves the Subject exposed to become part of the circulation of commodities as humans transform their interactions in a world of de-symbolized

objects. Paradoxically, the neoliberal Subject is rendered incapable of stepping outside of economic categories of value due to the lack of cultural symbols upon which such an effort may be premised. Dufour considers this to be a new type of violence and the dawn of an era of human servitude to the logic of neoliberal capitalism.

As the age of grand narratives closes, Dufour briefly considers the role of Nature as a potential starting point for grounding a new vision of the Subject. The potential is clear, for if there is no physical nature, then the necessary element for symbols like nation-states, which require physical territory and natural capital, are missing. To this Dufour responds by arguing, somewhat indirectly, that ecology must be careful to avoid becoming subsumed within other narratives. This is the case because ecology forces the issue of defining the human-environment relationship and, as a framework for orienting human action, at least tacitly relies on a construction of the human subject. Moreover, the ecological movement of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century is emerging at a time when the options for constructing the human subject are few. Hence there is a danger that ecological narratives will simply be subsumed into neoliberal logic. Following this reasoning, we may extend Dufour's brief and intermittent treatment of the environment in terms of its implications for emergent theories such as those of "ecosystem services." Among other things, the "ecosystem services" framework assembles the world of ecological relationships as objects to be valued for their usefulness in an economic theory of well-being that rests on assumptions regarding what is good for the human subject. As such, these ideas do not symbolize a new relationship of the Subjects to Nature, and we need to be cautious about how we adapt to ecological relationships *qua* "ecosystem services."

The two main examples that Dufour uses to expound his argument are the denial of generational difference in modern education and, following Freudian implications, the denial of sexual difference. The former will be of particular interest to those concerned with preserving the collective wisdom of Western knowledge or indigenous cultures in efforts to achieve sustainability. Dufour offers a penetrating, if at times sarcastic, look at the capacity of modern universities to function in their traditional role as educational institutions. His argument turns on the idea that symbols are transmitted through discourse and that, in many cases, new and innovative technologies are interrupting the traditional manner of symbol transmission. In this sense there has been a loss of poignancy in the face-to-face instruction among subjects in the process of knowledge sharing. Further, suggests Dufour, post-modern pedagogy has encouraged the dissolution of generational differences by denying that the cultural symbols of previous generations, such as those implied by the teacher-pupil relationship.

*The Art of Shrinking Heads* concludes with a call to resist "the consolidation of total capitalism." Dufour's closing arguments reiterate, in a much more direct manner than the body of his work, the risk that de-symbolization presents to individuals and society. However, Dufour does not call for a reinvention of the Other. Rather, he believes we are better off without the failed narratives of the modern Subject and offers a final caution: The emerging ideology of neoliberal capitalism is one that requires we attend not only to how we define and symbolize the objects in the world around us, but how we, in turn, adapt to the world we are creating.