

**Selman Emre  
Gürbüz**

Kadir Has University,  
Istanbul,  
Turkey  
✉ semregurbuz@gmail.com

# The Discourses of Capitalism: Everyday Economists and the Production of Common Sense

by **Christian W. Chun**

Routledge, 2017.

One of the main problems of the political economy is the general tendency to overlook the cultural transition and interaction between societies, although, the logic of the globalization is highly dependent on the societies' cultural accumulation. The basic idea behind this process is the ever-changing comprehension of people's reaction to the political and economic policies. Eventually, human capital is the most important referring object in all social progress. Christian W. Chun's work aims at indicating the ideological, hegemonic, and discursive meanings that accumulate this human capital. Chun makes an analysis over the discursive social construction mechanism of common meanings in a critical standpoint. He carefully surveys the appearance of "common sense" in everyday economy.

The main purpose of the book is to indicate the positive and negative understandings of Capitalism. He critically focuses on the supporters and opponents of global Capitalism *via* detailed interviews. A selection of over 300 of video-taped interviews, Chun's aim is to show how everyday economy makes sense within the context of globalized Capitalism. The book consists of seven chapters. The first one explores the definitions and relative meanings of Capitalism. Chun shows the generation of different meanings for different people at the dawn of Capitalism. The second chapter explores terms like ideology, common sense and hegemony in detail. Chun borrows critical ideas from scholars including Terry Eagleton, Raymond Williams, Louis Althusser, Slavoj Zizek and other. The third one surveys the economic representation of discourses and itineraries of Capitalism. He carefully focuses on the evolution of hegemonic and counter hegemonic articulations. The fourth, fifth, and the sixth chapters similarly focus on the social construction of Capitalism's discourses such as "the only system that ever does work", "nothing is perfect", "who gets all the money". These chapters heavily reflect the discursive reflection of the positive and negative understandings of the capitalist economy. The last chapter discusses the possibility of the engagement of public pedagogy in this progress. In a Gramscian sense, Chun tries to construct a counter hegemonic comprehension and social awareness against the pejorative meanings of Capitalism.

First, Chun states that the book's purpose is to examine how people make meaning out of the economy in their lives. In his words: "the aim of this book is to understand how hegemonic discourses of Capitalism are taken up, mediated, and dialogically co-constructed by people in their role as everyday economists, and the ways in which these discourses are reproduced and accepted as 'common sense'" (p. 21).

The discussion about ideology particularly important in Chun's work. He argues over the ideological meanings within the context of Marxian false consciousness and "the problem of ideology" by Stuart Hall. In particular, ideologies live on with language, concepts, categories, social groups in the process of social patterns. Furthermore, the categories in the capitalist ideology depend on the embedded concepts in market economy such as "freedom", "liberty", and "equality" and there is a practical side in common sense thinking (pp. 23-24). Besides, Chun accurately mentions that the concepts of culture and democracy are inter-connected with ideology and they are constantly changing over time (p. 27).

Later on, Chun makes use of Gramscian categorization of "common sense" and "good sense" and emphasizes that the neoliberal common sense (as a pejorative term) is threatening people's freedom and liberties (pp. 35-37). He summarizes the referred chapter with the importance of the presence of ideology. As he puts: "the discussions featured in this chapter by Stuart Hall, Slavoj Žižek, Louis Althusser, Göran Therborn, Terry Eagleton, Raymond Williams and Antonio Gramsci on ideology have offered avenues through which we might continue to explore notions and practices of ideology, rather than merely jettisoning the idea altogether. Indeed, perhaps there is nothing more ideological than claiming ideology either does not exist or is no longer useful as a construct" (p. 40).

After that, Chun put forward that Americans experience the negative realities under the capitalist political economy: the systematic de-unionization of workplaces, declining wages and salaries, forced early retirements, the growth of part-time jobs at the expense of full-time jobs including education sector in which 75% of all universities in the United States are now part-time adjuncts and increasing of peoples' loan debt over time (p. 47). Furthermore, Chun states that to challenge these hegemonic patterns, it is necessary to understand the shared meaning of capitalist mechanism (p. 55). That is why he pursues his work with interviewing urban people and searching the discourses over this. Because, according to Chun, the discourses are shaped by social circulation and the participation of local people and he focuses on the participants' construction of "common sense" about how Capitalism works (pp. 56-57). First, he analyzes the participants who adopt the discourse of Capitalism, and later, he focuses on the people who question and oppose to this discourse. For instance, he surveys that the first bunch of participants adopt the discourse "Capitalism helps the world", it creates wealth and jobs (pp. 59-62). However he adds that the participants emphasize the individual motivation and miss in the discourse of wealth creation; i.e., it is based on the collective comprehension rather than individual efforts (p. 62). Another important point in the interviews is that some participants relate and correlate the achievements of Capitalism with showing their country as a proof and beyond that, with the Cold War logic, Socialism is seen as antithetical to human nature (p. 72). Furthermore, it could be a solid example of ideological source of the capitalist discourse. Additionally, Socialism is labeled as a dictatorial *Other* (p. 74).

Chun observes that the supporters of the capitalistic models have constructed the common sense that Capitalism and democracy are synonyms and the participants generally approach to the systems as historical because of the absence of the access to other alternative concepts and categories (pp. 82-88). Another original reference in Chun's work is the example of television show, called *The Office*. As a very popular show, *The Office* indicates the display of dissatisfaction and inefficient workplace. Furthermore, Chun matches this reference with an actor in another interview. The actor points to the individual efforts for the struggle in the system and he tries to elude the worker identity with his entrepreneur of the self (pp. 103-104).

Chun surveys another discourse of Capitalism that "nothing is perfect". As he argues, some participants support the idea that Capitalism works and, takes comfort in setting binary oppositions, at least one of which has freedom to criticize the system contrary to Communism (p. 114). With this well-chosen interview, Chun indicates a solid example of the foundations about the construction of the capitalistic common sense.

Later on, Chun focuses on the counter hegemonic approach against capitalist discourse. He makes a selection of interviews that shows that the system is not that free and democratic. For instance, one participant states that he is a product of capitalism and it is all about exploitation. It is an original part of the book because Chun confirms that the participant does not know the functional economic details of Capitalism but he claims that its essential characteristic is exploitation (p. 127).

As another critical example is that one participant argues that the capitalist system is powerful because of its ability to separate people; that Capitalism causes the abolishment of the community concepts and nobody knows their neighbors. Besides that, he mentions that the individualistic structure of the system makes people lonely (pp. 127-128). For instance, as he argues in one interview, the participant complains about over-working and states that the people have gotten to the point that they are expendable (p. 134). Based on the interview, Chun successfully combines the issue with tragic events such as committing suicides and sudden deaths of workers because of the non-stop working (p. 134).

The last chapter is an effort to construct a "good sense" against common sense from a Gramscian perspective. Chun seeks to discuss the appearance of public pedagogy within the context of Capitalism. He quotes Gramsci to indicate the possible critical engagements about the common sense and he states that it is necessary to create better conditions to achieve real freedom and democracy with the linkage between the academic and social communities. In his words, "to achieve these goals, we must continue to critically and dialogically engage on the terrain of everyday people's common sense and see the openings and fissures as avenues through which their latent good sense can emerge in more active, productive, and material ways. This will not happen if those of us in the academy do not engage in the praxis of everyday life, involving everyday people in their communities" (p. 144). Chun closes the chapter with Marshall Berman's words. The quotation mentions the importance of the true intellectual within the context of social awareness and connection to the people. Lastly, with a good linkage to the book, the recognition and the experience of the people is crucial in this process and reading Karl Marx's *Capital* (*Das Kapital*) is inefficient without reading signs in the street (p. 144).

Overall, Christian W. Chun's "The Discourses of Capitalism: Everyday Economists and the Production of Common Sense" is a fruitful text that makes a successful analysis about the public opinion with respect to capitalistic discourse in the process. Also, the book contains sociological material which enlightens the reader about the perception of everyday people. The discourses which are presented in the work indicate crucial codes and social construction of people, as the source of human capital. Moreover, Chun refers to quite important thinkers in critical thinking like Gramsci, Marx, Eagleton, Althusser and Hall and he successfully combine their pieces into his book.

However, it could be said that the book has deficiencies about the conceptual framework. For instance, as Chun emphasizes, Capitalism is a big (meta narrative) and relative term, because of that it is necessary to put technical differences of capitalist models. The content might be improved if Chun could give more details about the neoliberal policies and categorization under the umbrella of Capitalism. As Simon Springer states, neoliberalism (as a subset of Capitalism) has four main variants: (1) ideological hegemonic project; (2) policy and program; (3) state form and (4) governmentality (Simon Springer 2012, pp. 136-137). The last one emphasizes the re-production of power and knowledge in the social construction process in the Foucauldian sense (Springer 2012, p. 137). However, Chun does not emphasize the genealogical re-production enough. It could be fruitful to add the genealogical critics to the Marxist perception of the political economy because the reciprocity is quite related to the self-critique in political and economic process. Besides that, as Joseph Stiglitz mentions, the banks are in the center of global economic crises within the context of capitalist production and the risk management mechanism is very crucial to this process (Joseph E. Stiglitz 2009, p. 331). Chun could extend his analyses into more technical sphere to balance the weight of the economy beyond politics.

In conclusion, Chun's Discourse of Capitalism is a must-read for the people, who are curious about the perception of everyday political economy and the discourses. He presents quite fruitful material to understand the construction of common sense in this process. However, Chun could enrich his work with the self-critique of Marxian approaches to sustain the reciprocity in this process. Furthermore, it could be fruitful to emphasize the technical issues about the capitalist economic models to indicate the logic of financial diffusion. Eventually, political economy is not a shallow realm in which, it is necessary to analyze and balance both economic-technical data and political presence in the process.

## References

- Springer, Simon.** 2012. "Neoliberalism as Discourse: Between Foucauldian Political Economy and Marxian Poststructuralism." *Critical Discourse Studies*, 9(2): 133-147.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2012.656375>
- Stiglitz, Joseph E.** 2009. "The Anatomy of a Murder: Who Killed America's Economy?" *Critical Review: A Journal of Politics and Society*, 21(2-3): 329-339.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08913810902934133>