



Where's the capital? A geographical essay

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Abstract

This paper is inspired by Thomas Piketty's book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Piketty does a wonderful job of tracing income and wealth over time, and relating changes to trends of economic and population growth, and drawing out the implications for inequality, inheritance and even democracy. But, he says relatively little about where capital is located, how capital accumulation in one place relies on activities elsewhere, how capital is urbanized with advanced capitalism and what life is like in spaces without capital. This paper asks 'where is the geography in *Capital*' or 'where is the geography of capital in *Capital*'? Following Piketty's lead, the paper develops its analysis through a number of important novels. It examines, first, the debate that Jane Austen ignored colonialism and slavery in her treatment of nineteenth century Britain, second, how Balzac and then Zola provide insight to the urban political economy of capital later in the century, and third, how Katherine Boo attends to inequality as the everyday suffering of the poor.

Keywords: Cities; inequality; novels; Piketty; social justice; suffering

Introduction

Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* is a rare thing. Its 600 pages offer a descriptive, occasionally technical, account on the dry subject of economic change and inequality. Yet, it has received widespread academic and popular interest, provoking debate in university classrooms, in the media and across a few dinner tables. The author has done a fantastic job of pulling out '*Capital*'s key messages and communicating them to a wide audience. In the UK at least, the release of *Capital* is well timed. As this essay is being written the most hyped television programme in the Autumn schedule is series five of 'Downton Abbey', my local cinema is showing the film 'Riot Club' that

recounts the exploits of the exclusive University of Oxford Bullingdon Club, and the universal reaction to the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission report *Elitist Britain* is an underwhelming 'we know'. Piketty's claim that 'by 2010, and despite the crisis that began in 2007–2008, capital was prospering as it had not done since 1913' (2014: 42) or more colloquially that the economic and social structure of western capitalist countries in the early twenty-first century resembles that of the late nineteenth century has struck a chord.

Piketty explains this return to 'patrimonial capitalism' as the consequence of a rate of return on capital that exceeds the growth of output and income. Most of the book is devoted to explaining when and to what extent rates of return to capital have changed compared with income from labour, as well as the relationship with other factors such as population growth. This gives *Capital* broad descriptive appeal. It has also provided the book with a political edge in the sense that it has questioned the 'wisdom' of neo-classical trained economists that growth would be balanced and inequality decline beyond the medium term. As Piketty puts it, 'There is no fundamental reason why we should believe that growth is automatically balanced' (2014: 16). As he goes on to show, labour's share of national income in most leading western economies has not increased significantly in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and even more rarely have increases been greater than returns to capital.

If *Capital* did no more than to provide a long durée analysis of how wage earners were being screwed while waiting on the promises of 'trickle down' Piketty might have gained some new friends on the Left but most academics would have been unimpressed. *Capital*, however, is more complicated than a well told story of capital versus labour. It investigates, for instance, how inequalities of wealth are distributed across age groups with important implications for how wealth is passed through generations. It provides a close analysis of how inequalities of capital are more extreme than inequalities of income. And it maps out the effects of slow growth on capital returns, itself a return to mid-nineteenth century and earlier conditions.

Nevertheless, Piketty does leave some important issues unexplored even though they might be vital to his key messages. My aim in this paper is not to provide an audit of misgivings about *Capital*. I am neither skilled enough to unpick its technical basis and engagement with literature in economics, nor ultimately am I interested in attempting to undermine an analysis that brings a concern with inequality to greater public attention. But I do want to raise a concern with *Capital*. This concern is prompted by Piketty's apparent disinterest in geography or more specifically to space. Four pages from the end of the book he writes, 'I see economics as a subdiscipline of the social sciences, alongside history, sociology, anthropology, and political science' (2014: 573). What happened to geography? Indeed, where is the geography in *Capital* or, more importantly, where is the geography of capital in *Capital*?

This paper proceeds in three parts and because Piketty deploys novels as support for his arguments I will relate each to a novelist.¹ In the first part I want to pick up on how *Capital* treats the supposedly stable relations between capital and income, and between capital and class, at the turn of the nineteenth century by considering a vibrant debate in the social sciences about the work of Jane Austen and her book *Mansfield Park* in particular. In the second, I want to draw attention to how capital in the nineteenth century shifted from a rural to an urban spatial political economy. This part will draw from the writing of Honoré de Balzac and Emile Zola, largely informed by the work of David Harvey. In the twenty-first century it is now well established that the story of capital is the story of urbanization and cities. Cities account for most of the world's GDP, itself unequally distributed with 100 cities commanding 30 per cent of world GDP and the urban share of GDP increasing faster than the rate generally for most of the past half century (World Bank 2009). In the third part, I want to consider what *Capital* does not tell us about social justice, again focusing on the urbanization of capital, and using Zola as a hook to introduce the work of Katherine Boo.

Capital and the South: 'dead silence'

I am not a Jane-ite, an enthusiast for the writings and life of Jane Austen. I still recall my first attempt to read *Emma*, and indeed my second and third attempts, all of which ended within 20 or so pages. My overriding impression of the book was of highly poised set-piece conversations in drawing rooms of the type that I could better imagine from visits to National Trust country houses than from Austen's prose. But eventually I came to appreciate the irony and the politics of Austen's writing, and even finished *Mansfield Park*, which is handily the novel most frequently used by cultural and historical geographers, and by Thomas Piketty.

Piketty may have had more immediate success than me with Austen as he uses her novels as a key reference to the conditions of wealth-holding in early nineteenth century Britain. To live well, Piketty tells us via Austen, required an income of between £500 and £1,000, enough to put people in the top 1 per cent at a time when per capita national income was about £30. An income above £500 would provide for servants and the trappings of 'comfort', but £1,000 marked a critical threshold to wealth-holding and class. Many of Austen's principal characters – most famously Mr Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* – had incomes well in excess of this figure; an income at around £2,000 that would place them securely in the top 0.1 per cent (see Downie 2006). These incomes were derived from rents on land and government bonds, the returns on each being broadly similar and, according to Piketty, consistent over time from the latter eighteenth through to early nineteenth centuries. Yet, he notes, 'Tending

to one's wealth was not a tranquil matter of collecting rent' (2014: 115), a point that is underscored by reference to *Mansfield Park* and the need for Sir Thomas Bertram to attend to the problems of his West Indies plantations.

Mansfield Park is often referred to as the quintessential country estate novel through which Austen explores intricate relations of class status, including the symbolism of 'land', gender and family, and morality (Tuite 2000). It is also the novel mostly closely associated with critiques of British imperialism and the relationship between colonial expansion, capital accumulation and the changing shape and representation of class power (Boulukos 2006). Austen has stood accused of being an apologist for empire, legitimating the English 'social mission' by producing the amnesia of 'resisting or avoiding that other setting' (Said 1993: 96; Spivak 1985: 243).² The treatment of *Mansfield Park* in *Capital*, however, reads on occasion more like a contemporary City trader prospectus. Sir Thomas's proprietorship of an estate in Antigua forms part of a diversified investment portfolio. We are told that compared with rents on land in Britain (typically 4–5 per cent), returns on lands abroad could be 7–8 per cent or more 'if one struck an especially good bargain' although time and effort needed to be deducted (2014: 207). With these returns, British subjects began to accumulate considerable assets in the rest of the world. Drawing from *Mansfield Park* again we read in *Capital* that circa 1810 British assets held abroad represented only around 10 per cent of national income, whereas by 1914 foreign assets were valued at six times national income (2014: 120). This is an enormous step-change in wealth and Britain's relations with the world economy. The observation leads Piketty to comment that 'one has to hope that Austen's heroes and their descendants were able to adjust in time and follow Sir Thomas's lead by investing a portion of their land rents abroad' (2014: 120–1).

Invest? In a book that takes its title as a play on Marx, surely Sir Thomas is not diversifying his portfolio but complicit in 'primitive accumulation'. Piketty is clearly aware that, to follow Marx's famous discussion in Volume 1 of *Capital*, it was the resources from Empire that spurred accumulation in Europe. What he does not acknowledge is that this capital came at the 'price' of the near total dismantlement of the economic, social and cultural fabric of the colonies. Dating from at least Marx's 1853 article in the *New York Daily Tribune*, there is an enormous historiography of colonial endeavour that outlines in terrible detail how the British (as well as many others) accumulated assets abroad (Bates 2001; Davis 2001). Moreover, social scientists have engaged in a heated debate on how the literature of the early nineteenth century, and especially Jane Austen, attends to Britain's relations with Empire and primitive accumulation.

In his influential book *Culture and Imperialism* Edward Said claims that Austen seems only 'vaguely aware' of British imperialism and, moreover, how it affected materially, socially and culturally what was happening 'at home'

(1993: 89). His argument centres on the 'reticent appearances' of Sir Thomas Bertram's Antigua estate in *Mansfield Park*. In the first few pages readers are informed that the family has an estate in the Caribbean, then 20 or so pages later that the estate is not doing well, and that Sir Thomas must go to Antigua to sort things out. Despite his uncanny absence for much of the book, however, Said argues that Sir Thomas's trips to Antigua and perhaps more keenly his return (thin and tired Austen tells us) are 'crucial to the action' (1993: 89). Nevertheless, Said accuses Austen of failing to explore the significance of Sir Thomas's comings and goings, thereby ensuring that we interpret the events in the novel and the lifestyles of the 'higher classes' as disconnected from and unconcerned by empire, and especially the role of slaves (then considered 'capital'). As Susan Fraiman has put it, Said offers up 'Austen as exhibit A in the case for culture's endorsement of empire' and perhaps *the* writer 'who made colonialism thinkable by constructing the West as center, home, and norm, while pushing everything else to the margins' (1995: 809). But, Austen, Fraiman goes on to claim, is more subtle than Said appeared to realize and needs to be treated not as a source to be mined for facts, apropos *Capital*, but as a critical commentator on the connections between property, class and imperial power (also Tuite 2000). Indeed, a closer reading of *Mansfield Park* reveals a novel that rests on a sub-plot of social and political consciousness, and is suggestive of social and economic instability.

Let us return to the principal claim against Jane Austen levelled by Said; namely, that she, is 'naive, complacent, and demurely without overt political opinion' (Fraiman 1995: 807; also Boulukos 2006). The key text in *Mansfield Park* to support his point is the conversation between Fanny Price, Sir Thomas's niece, and her cousin, Edmund, in which she asks 'Did you not hear me ask him [Sir Thomas] about the slave trade last night?' Edmund replies, 'I did – and I was in hope the question would be followed up by others. It would have pleased your uncle to be inquired of farther'. But, as Fanny points out, in what Said infers is her own narrow world view, 'And I longed to do it – but there was such a dead silence!' Said's suggestion is that Sir Thomas is unable to talk of the slave trade as there is no way of talking about it (1993: 96). By contrast to the silence on human exploitation and violence, Austen does tell us that Sir Thomas is enthusiastic to talk about the social life of the island, the balls and gaiety of the plantocracy (Austen 1996: 231).

The charge is that Austen, through the 'dead silence' on slavery, is complicit to the project of British Empire (Boulukos 2006; Seymour et al. 1998: 343).³ Yet, Fraiman (1995) has argued that Austen deliberately invokes the 'dumbness' of the characters in *Mansfield Park* as a means to rebuke Britain's moral hypocrisy and the corruption of class. Austen was a critic of slavery and at the time that she was writing *Mansfield Park* British society was full of debate about its virtues.⁴ Indeed, although the book was published seven years after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 it is now widely accepted that the plot

is set mostly between 1805 and 1812, and that Sir Thomas was obliged to visit his estate in order to deal with the consequences of the trade's near end and to handle the conversion of slavery (still legal) to labour (see Downie 2006; Seymour et al. 1998). Indeed, it has been suggested that, while Austen does not explore directly the exploitation of slavery, she does hint at the potential disruption caused by the end of the slave trade. In so doing, *Mansfield Park* contradicts the wisdom, as Piketty would have it, of investing a portion of land rents abroad. Austen indicates that Sir Thomas went to Antigua in order to deal with the 'poor returns' (1996: 26) and with the intention, it is now thought, to sell the estate which we can infer he did when we are told that his stay is extended in order to complete 'the final arrangement', and once back at Mansfield Park the estate is never mentioned again (Downie 2006). Such an account would be consistent with the empirical records of many British holders of Caribbean estates in the late eighteenth and first decades of the nineteenth century (Seymour et al. 1998).

An alertness to the geography of capital in the early nineteenth century highlights the means by which capital accumulation took place and questions whether, as is suggested in *Capital*, the ratios between capital and income were so reliable as to hardly need mention (see 2014: 207). Close readings of *Mansfield Park* also suggest that Austen's Britain was not socially and economically stable. Indeed, *Mansfield Park* is published at about the midpoint in the period covered by E.P. Thompson's classic, *The Making of the English Working Class*, which is hardly a history of caution and stasis (Thompson 1963). Referring to *Mansfield Park*, Daniels and Cosgrove argue that the British class system underpinned by a landed culture that Austen was so supported of was being tested by a 'culture of money' (1993: 67). A rising group of speculators had become wealthy through trading on new commodities and the public debt required by repeated wars – Britain was at war almost all Austen's life – and which motivated agricultural depressions that drove up food prices and provoked riots. Indeed, although Sir Bertram is positioned by Austen as super rich – his income is estimated from the text as £5,000 which would put him well within the top 0.1 per cent of British society at the time – there are plenty of clues in *Mansfield Park* that he and his family may have felt vulnerable to this new culture. Tuite (2000) argues, for example, that *Mansfield Park* and other texts sketch the instability of class and the 'diminution' of the aristocracy. Intriguingly, Sir Thomas is written by Austen as a baronet, hence a member of the ruling class but not part of the nobility, and perhaps no more than one generation away from a fortune based on 'trade'. At a time of great social turbulence, the 'comforts and consequences of a handsome house and a large income' (Austen 1996: 5) were not to be taken for granted, a point that we might deduce from Sir Thomas's near desperate enthusiasm to get daughter and niece married to secure or better his family's social standing. If capital and income ratios were stable in this period then the social, economic

and political structure underpinning them appear to have been anything but.

Capital and the city

Jane Austen is not regarded as an 'urban novelist'. Some of her books describe Britain undergoing a process of rapid urbanization in the early nineteenth century. In *Mansfield Park*, Portsmouth is described as crowded and chaotic, it's populous 'greasy' and hard-drinkers, an account very much in line with dystopian views of other novelists. London, by contrast, seems to be given a more generous treatment, represented as a complex social and moral space. It is dangerous to class norms – especially to young women whose virtue needs to be kept pure – and is recognized as a focal point of Britain's social progress in counterpoint to rural society. London is a place of trade, social mobility, consumption and new cultural spheres, a place where money matters more than landed status, an exciting place on the cusp of the 'maelstrom' wrought by modernity (Berman 1983).

But Austen's attention to London is nothing compared with Balzac's accounts of Paris – 'Paris figures almost everywhere' in his novels (Harvey 2003: 25). Notably, Balzac's novel *Père Goriot* figures centrally in *Capital*. It is used to confirm that in the early 1800s whether from land or bonds, as Piketty puts it, 'income was certain and steady and sufficient to finance a very definite lifestyle and to reproduce across generations a familiar and well-understood social status' (2014: 207; also 106, 411). The stability lasted through to the Belle Époque, allowing a writer 'to economically set the scene, hint at a way of life, evoke rivalries, and, in a word, describe a civilization'. What the economic (pun?) setting of the scene does not do, it would seem, is describe the enormous shifts taking place in 'civilization' over this period. Yet, it is for describing the enormity of the changes to French society and to the geographical arrangement of capital for which Balzac is most noted.

Geographical treatments of Balzac have been dominated, at least in the English language, by the work of David Harvey. In picking up some of Harvey's work my aim is simply to call attention to how *Capital* seems to ignore urbanization as critical to the formation, distribution and reproduction of capital. Piketty does note that through the nineteenth century there was a profound shift away from land (and agriculture) to industry, finance and real estate. Moreover, he is keen to stress residential real estate in his definition of capital (2014: 48), not a view universally shared by economists. He comments too on how housing rents increase as a proportion of national incomes and the high price of real estate is an important signal of Ricardian scarcity and contributor to wealth inequality. What is not clear is the location of these houses or rents, and whether this matters.

Yet, urbanization should be central to any account of capital from at least the early nineteenth century. During this period we witness what Lefebvre signalled as the ‘complete urbanization of society’, a process whereby all social and economic life, whether located in cities or not has become urbanized; that is, subject to the logic of urban capital (Lefebvre 2003). Capital accumulation is determined, according to Lefebvre, by a shift to the secondary (or, financial) circuit and as later developed by Harvey the ‘switching’ of capital between the secondary and tertiary circuits (Harvey 1985). This account of capital is not a stable and seamless transition but driven by the need for capitalists to resolve periodic crises. According to Harvey the first crisis of modern capitalism occurred in France in 1848, laying bare the surplus extraction of capital from labour power (Harvey 2003). The response was the destruction and reconstruction of Paris.

Balzac’s novels marked this lead up to crisis while pointing to the everyday class antagonism of the city. His books are fast-paced (and quickly written), full of rich characters from a wide array of social backgrounds, people get rich quick and lose their fortunes just as easily, they entangle themselves with political causes, and make deals to get patronage from the state. He is attentive to class and especially mocking of the bourgeoisie and their attempts to ‘rise above’ and egotistical claims to be ‘cultured’ (Harvey 2003: 36–8). The pages describe a context in which people find themselves ‘in an environment that promises adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and at the same time that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know everything we are’. The quote is Berman’s prelude to a definition of the modern . . . a process ‘of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which as Marx said, “all that is solid melts into air” ’ (Berman 1983: 15).⁵

Balzac describes Paris before the ‘melt’, before Haussmann, when the city was ‘dirty, crowded, and unhealthy. Covered with mud and makeshift shanties, damp and fetid, filled with the signs of poverty as well as the garbage and waste left there by the inadequate and faulty sewer system, these narrow roads hardly seemed worth celebrating’ (Rice 1997: 9). To Balzac, Paris was dark, complex, unstable, a monster driven by a passion for money. In a few years this space would be destroyed – as Baudelaire lamented in *Paris Spleen* – and within a generation Paris would be transformed to become a bourgeois space, ‘dedicated to ostentation, consumption, and display’ (Rice 1997: 38–9; Rearick 2011). The city was cut across with 85 miles of new boulevards and streets, many lined with cafes and stores, mixing consumption and pleasure, 15,000 street lamps (gas), kiosks, benches, and urinals were installed, and small public gardens and large parks were laid out. The new aesthetic replaced sandstone paving with tarmac for quicker movement, building regulations dictated minute architectural details, old neighbourhood boundaries were changed,

polluting industries were removed and future expansion was planned through an enormous expropriation in the suburbs in 1859.

As Harvey argues, Haussmann installed a new phase of capitalism, one that relied on urban rents. These rents were possible through the enforced land-use sorting, disruption of property rights and greater degree of spatial separation of classes. The deliberate undoing of class mixing that had characterized the old Paris allowed segmented markets to be established and property values, especially in the bourgeois quarters to the west, to increase (2003: 239). Capital accumulation required (spatial) class inequality. It also required the development of 'real estate finance' and a different appreciation of risk. Balzac's *Comédie humaine* had already mapped out this changing perception of risk and the enormous speculations that made fortunes more quickly than honest toil (Tilby 2011). Haussmann institutionalized debt-finance within the state, covering budget shortfalls with a range of dubious schemes and passing risk to property developers who were themselves embarking on debt leverage and speculating on the revalorization of the new city. Harvey draws his account to a close by reference to a scene in Emile Zola's *The Kill* in which a financier, Saccard, looks out over the city and observes how 'more than one district will be melted down, and gold will stick to the fingers of those who heat and stir the mortar' (Zola 2004: 68).

The segue between the work of Balzac and Zola is the transformation of capital to an urban setting and its circulation in an ever-more fictitious form as speculative finance. In this process the state becomes a key actor, both to enable the 'spatial fix' of capital through dispossessing the poor and creating the planning norms of urban expansion, and is critical to enforcing order amidst social instability. Zola represents Saccard as a bio-pic of this new capitalist logic: he moves from a peasant background to a position in the Paris planning department, from where he realizes the opportunities for enrichment through borrowing and speculation, and of increasing his social status by predation on the collapse of 'old money' and the desperation of the poor. The 'heroes' of Balzac are the victims of Zola's Saccard. As Belenky (2013) notes, the capital accumulation mapped out in these novels – and more literally mapped out in the topography of Second Empire Paris – is a process reliant on a recalibrated moral compass that rewards viciousness and degeneracy. So, Piketty is probably correct to point out that by the start of the Belle Époque (around 1870), 1 per cent of Parisians lived very well on incomes from capital around 80–100 times the average wage (2014: 369). What he does not explain is how that condition came about. Portfolios had certainly diversified and by 1914 (at least) urban real estate was prominent (2014: 370). Looked at from the viewpoint of the urbanization of capital by the end of the Haussmann project it becomes clear that the circulation of capital is made possible by the ever-greater role of financial markets. Paris is controlled by the Saccards slashing their hands across the landscape mimicking the swathes cut through Paris by capital.⁶

Capital and social justice

Balzac's Père Goirot dies in poverty in a rancid boarding house. Most people did at the time that Balzac was writing or when Engels toured the slums of Manchester and London. As Engels noted, the 'great towns' were sites of 'bare existence' where people 'regard[ed] each other only as useful objects' and the 'stronger treads the weaker under foot'. Among the 'barbarous indifference' and the 'hard egotism on one hand, and nameless misery on the other' there is 'social warfare' that one has to 'wonder that the whole crazy fabric still hangs together' (Engels 1845: 60). Run on through the nineteenth century and the writings of Charles Dickens and Jacob Riis, to the twentieth and the novels of Upton Sinclair and Jack London, and to the late twentieth and early twenty-first of Rohinton Mistry and Chris Abani, and the same phrases would apply. Given this enormous mass of human misery, an understanding of inequality must, it is reasonable to assume, devote considerable attention to the poor. Even in the abstract, if inequality changes because of the ratio of capital over income then it is fair to wonder why incomes are so low (relative to rents) and what that means.

I am sure that Thomas Piketty is concerned, even motivated in his research, to understand and change the conditions through which the poor live – or are forced to live – and how they die. Yet, in reading *Capital*, I was struck by the attention to the rich, to those with wealth and their distance from the mean of incomes and wealth/capital, and how little analysis is given to the poor. Yet inequality has grown in recent times not simply through the oligarchs and the hedge fund managers but through the precariats. We might, as Paul Krugman notes, be back to the Gilded Age of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (the 1940 film perhaps not uncoincidentally remade by Baz Luhrmann in 2013) but the historical analogy might note the novels that this 'age' also inspired: Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934), Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). But, I want to use Zola once more as my hook in order to raise the issue of social justice, or how we might as Liberation Theologists so aptly put it, offer a 'preferential option for the poor' in our concern with inequalities.

Mention the name Zola in South Africa and people may make two connections. The first is to Zola, a part of Soweto established in 1958 under apartheid and the second is to Zola, a one-time resident of the township and now a Kwaito singer and television presenter. Zola (real name Bonginkosi Thuthukani Dlamini) bases many of his lyrics on the issues affecting black people and draws from Tsotsitaal, an urban slang associated with gang cultures, to highlight poverty, unemployment, disease, crime, and racism, as well as the resistance of gangster lifestyles, defying the law and consumption. The lyrics celebrate the get-rich-quick schemes and bling of the post-apartheid black middle class and elite, but recognize that this is not the reality for most

South Africans, a country with a worsening Gini coefficient and rising extremes of absolute poverty even in cities. His 30 minute 'reality' documentary, 'Zola 7', once the most watched programme on South Africa television with a regular audience of around five million viewers, addressed these people's problems and attempted to turn nightmares into dreams; providing Zola with the epithet 'Ghetto Dream Maker'. The programme's success was predicated on drawing audiences into the daily suffering of the poor – representing the lack of a job, homelessness caused by fire, or injury due to domestic violence as genuine or real. The apparently spontaneous outpouring of emotion by protagonists, initially in describing their desperate conditions and then in expressing their joy and gratitude for the solution delivered in the course of the programme was deeply moving.

Unwittingly, 'Zola 7' challenged the environmental determinism that characterizes Emile Zola's writing; the conditions of poverty determine people's personalities, deepen pathologies and dictate their life chances.⁷ Rather, inequality is shown to be about more than the lack of income or capital, it is also about suffering, disorientation and access to power that manifests as not breathing the same air, drinking the same water, or living on the same subsoil. In the case of Soweto this means a township built originally on the city's sewage farms, elsewhere in Johannesburg it is about settlements on old mine land, in densely packed spaces lacking emergency services (Bremner 2013; Murray 2009). These are the physical conditions that often parallel anxiety, nerves, hyperactivity, headaches, depression, and which in turn reflect a 'not knowing' or confusion about how economic and social domination is affecting people's lives (Auyero and Swistun 2009). It makes inequality and poverty a lived and embodied experience, not one of people's own making but one that affects them deeply, which may determine their life chances but does not necessarily determine their personalities, nor do their personalities determine the conditions under which they live.

This is social injustice manifest as abjection and suffering. It is brought through in Katherine Boo's book, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* (2012), which traces the micro-history of a small slum near the international airport of Mumbai. Boo adopts an ethnographic approach that provides the novel with a sense of being grounded in real lives. The suffering of the families in Annawadi is in contrast to the shining new airport and hotels being built around it, developments which put the settlement under threat of removal, and the advertising hoarding for Italian tiles that provides the book's title. The contrast could be straight from Zola. One character, Mirchi, puts being poor amidst affluence rather well; 'everything around us is roses, and we are the shit in between'. Conditions in the 'sumpy plug of slum' (2012: xi) are unsanitary and dangerous; people are thin from lack of food and intestinal disease, their bodies are scarred by long hours working in construction, metal-work and police beatings, their huts are cramped, poorly ventilated and burn down, in

the midst of the slum is a trash-filled stagnant pool of polluted water. As Boo projects through an imagined exchange: ‘You won’t die to breathe [the dust], old-timers assured red-eyed new arrivals who fretted about the spoon-it-up air. But people seemed to die of it all the time – untreated asthma, lung obstructions, tuberculosis’ (2012: 14). The inequality – the ‘ambient envy’ as she puts it – is played out in the lives and urban conditions of the slum, the noise, the smell, the slime, the smoke, and on the bodies and in the minds of the poor. People die young, in pain, widows self-immolate, losing a job provokes suicide, children are maimed or drown. Yet, they suffer for success too – in order to build the human capital so much admired by economists, parents are eating ‘roti and slat’ to make budgets meet school fees; a common story in the Global South.

Boo shows that to survive in Annawadi requires people to exploit those around them who are just as poor, ill, misshapen, addicted and abusive, and all are exploited by the slumlord, the police, and the workshop owner [the idea could be from Balzac]. As Boo notes,

What appeared to be indifference to other people’s suffering had little to do with reincarnation, and less to do with being born brutish. I believe it had a good deal to do with conditions that had sabotaged their innate capacity for moral action. (Boo 2012: 254)

As she notes ‘it is blisteringly hard to be good’ and perhaps the only ‘good’ person in the book is Manju the daughter of the corrupt political boss of Annawadi. Manju works hard, cares for others, and seems to be more conscious of the conditions that have created and sustain Annawadi, as well as of what life is like in the ‘shiny Hyatts’ on their doorstep. As the most educated and the only upwardly mobile character in the book, Manju knows enough to realize that the scenes described in the required text by her school make no sense to her life. The book is Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* – first published in 1925 – which is set in high-society London at the turn of the twentieth century. I am not sure if Woolf’s characters provide a clue as to the rents needed to live well in Edwardian London but one gets the sense that Manju has a good idea how much is required in twenty-first century Mumbai.

Conclusion

One of the main goals of *Capital* is to ‘understand the conditions under which . . . concentrated wealth can emerge, persist, vanish, and perhaps reappear’ (Piketty 2014: 262). In those terms, *Capital* is an enormous contribution to the literature and merits its many accolades. That it does not always bite quite so hard on why these ‘conditions’ prevail or how in political economy terms they are produced is a matter for debate. Read from the

disciplinary standpoint of geography, how conditions are mapped on to space and the role that space itself plays in the production and reproduction of capital needs to be a more central part of this account. If the combinations of capital and income change over time they also change, often more radically, over space and it is impossible in the early twenty-first century to contemplate social and economic inequality without also having an appreciation for uneven capitalist development. The temporalities of capital require attention to its spatialities.

All that I have attempted to do here is to develop that point. To do so, I have used some novels by what are considered to be 'realist' writers, in the case of Balzac and Zola, and ethnographic in the case of Boo. Even so, it should be recognized that novels are unreliable sources for social science – although perhaps no more so than tax receipts – as the novelist might not be concerned with a loyal portrayal of an empirical reality but a sense of the times, the place and convey messages through characters, interactions and signs. That Austen and Balzac did not highlight that incomes and rents from capital were changing does not necessarily mean that readers held a tacit recognition of the sums involved. Nor can it be inferred that authors did not intend for readers to identify where capital was located and how its accumulation was an unstable process. Austen does not mention sugar, slavery and colonialism directly yet it is, as Said notes, the 'action' at the centre of the novel but there is no way to speak of it. This is a different silence from tacit consensus. The 'silence' of her characters implies a tension between the fetish of their wealth and the moralism that they want to imagine is at the core of their being. They might not know the income/capital ratios but some know the source of their comfort and are uncomfortable with it.

If in the 'classic novels of the nineteenth century, wealth is everywhere' then a reading of Balzac and Zola demands an explanation for what is happening when it is noted, as the quote continues, '[that] no matter how large or small the capital, or who owns it, it generally takes one of two forms: land or government bonds' (Piketty 2014: 113). The wealth of Balzac's 'heroes' is perilous, as Piketty notes, but is increasingly caught up in the urbanization of France, and, by the time of Balzac's death, by the reconstruction of Paris. This reconstruction was funded by government bonds and an enormous pyramid scheme of speculation which would bring later economic crises. Wealth might be land and bonds, with land now a broader 'property' including real estate, but the two have become intimately related through the city. Government borrowing funds urban programmes that benefit a well-placed few who can realize the gains from speculation – ideally on both the bonds and the property – and rotate those gains ever more quickly through the processes of urban growth. The process that produces inequality, and as described by Zola, could be extended to an account of inequalities through speculative urbanism in the contemporary Global South. Mumbai is a poster child for the new global

economy. Boo (2012) tells us that, according to the data, the population in Annawadi are not poor, indeed they are part of India's successful attempt to raise millions from poverty. Statistics and trends can misinform if the suffering described in the *behind the beautiful forevers* is someone's idea of a success story.

(Date accepted: October 2014)

Notes

1. *Capital* pays a lot of attention to Jane Austen and Honoré de Balzac, but Henry James, Orhan Pamuk and Tolstoy get brief mentions. In other nods to popular culture there are references to Desperate Housewives, Django Unchained, House, Mad Men and Titanic.
2. Spivak provides a different analysis to Said, considering Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and in particular the animalistic representation of Bertha Mason, a Jamaican creole.
3. Austen of course sets *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* in Bath, usually regarded as the city built on sugar and slaves.
4. The analogy in the text is between Sir Thomas's successful attempt to get his daughter Maria 'married off' – as if in an auction – and Fanny's assertion of power to reject her match to the loathsome Thomas Crawford.
5. To Marx, capital (or capitalists) would drive down wages until a point that the market could no longer afford the commodities that capital produced, heralding crisis and attempts to construct new circuits and for the cycle to repeat itself.
6. Perhaps the British equivalent is Anthony Trollope's *The Way we Live Now* which also marks the rise, corruption, and fall of finance capital during the nineteenth century, and for the USA, Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.
7. Naturalist literature – of which Emile Zola was a key figure – dominated novelist and academic accounts of poverty and inequality especially in the depictions of the slum, culminating in the 'culture and personality' genres of the 1960s. It was principally the critique from Marxism that undermined, although not removed, the Naturalist view.

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