

Property as the Modern Form of *Weltbeziehung*: Reflections on the structural change of possessive forms of relating to the world¹

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1. Introduction

Property is not simply one social institution among many that constitute the social formation of modernity. Rather, it forms one, if not *the*, basic institution on which not only the organisational structure of the economy and the world of work rest but also that of the welfare state and cultural institutions, family connections, education, and health care in equal measure. The acquisition and possession, securing and (re)distribution, transfer and conversion of property—be it material assets, financial assets, capital assets, or immaterial property titles—are at the centre of both the production and administrative operations of modernity. Both the sphere of consumption and that of production are organised and oriented in terms of property rights and forms of ownership. Precisely because this is so, the orientations, aspirations, and sensibilities associated with it are so deeply rooted, habitualised, and naturalised that not only the social sciences, especially sociology, but even society itself seems to be characterized by a peculiar “forgetfulness of property.” This is evident at almost all levels of social life: when the Central and Eastern European states began to fundamentally change their economic form around 1989, to them, *the market* appeared to be the core of the (desired) capitalist economy. It became their top priority to set its dynamics in motion. The question of ownership distribution, however, seemed to them to be absolutely secondary: it was not important who owned the enterprises (workers’ cooperatives, municipalities, small businesses, Western

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investors, large corporations), it was much more important to those in political power to set in motion the spiral-like productive dynamics of escalation that are central to capitalism.² To a certain extent, this even applies to China's economic transformation since Deng Xiaoping.³ A very similar pattern of interpretation could be observed when the massive neoliberal privatisation of both the health and care sectors and the media sector took effect in Western countries at about the same time. The decisive factor was that the services should be provided efficiently and reliably; the question of ownership was secondary.⁴ Similarly, the distribution disputes in capitalist societies routinely focus on income structures and thus on the remuneration for labour, while the increasingly unequal property and wealth relations are hardly ever the subject of debate or even consideration.⁵ And even at the micro level of social life, it can be observed that property structures are strangely excluded or ignored compared to procedural questions of ownership and operation. One example of this is when couples are not at all clear about who owns what in the property relations established by them and between them (who actually owns what in a joint household?); however, these issues become highly relevant especially in the event of divorce.⁶

At the same time, however, there is an almost monomaniacal "obsession with property" under modern capitalist conditions when it comes to acquiring property titles at all possible levels of existence—to *buy* something, to *generate income*, to *obtain entitlement rights*. Regardless of that, however, it seems as if the basic background structure of modern society, its property form, is lost to view and forgotten wherever it is not directly contested and dynamically "liquidated"; where it forms structures that have coagulated, as it were, out of sight of the actors. This is as remarkable as it is deplorable because property is of enormous scope and significance for the self-understanding

2 This is the subject of sub-project B07 (Property concepts and property conflicts in the privatisation process), headed by Joachim von Puttkamer, of the Collaborative Research Centre "Structural change in property" at the universities of Jena and Erfurt. Cf. Peters 2023.

3 The sub-project C01 "Hybrid property order in state capitalism", led by Carsten Herrmann-Pillath, is conducting research on this, also at universities of Jena and Erfurt.

4 The results are being analysed in sub-project C05, led by Silke van Dyk, "Conflicts over the public sphere and the future of the commons: Property relations in the context of welfare state transformation."

5 Distribution and class conflicts are the subject of sub-project B05 ("Property, inequality and class formation in socio-ecological transformation conflicts"), led by Klaus Dörre.

6 This is a striking finding of sub-project B06 ("Property inequality in the private sphere") led by Kathrin Leuze and Sylka Scholz (Althaber et al. 2023).

of modern society and its dominant form of *Weltbeziehung*. The basic thesis of this article is that every social formation establishes a very specific way of “being-in-the-world” for the subjects, a very specific set of relations to the world (*Weltbeziehung*) that is formed out of characteristic ways of experiencing, acting in and connecting to the world. With the concept of *Weltbeziehung*, I am trying to describe a form of habitualised experience and orientation that is anchored in the body and largely exists below the level of cognitive operations, consisting of a specific field of sensibility (or focus of attention) and a correlating structure of will (or pattern of intentionality). *Weltbeziehung* thus means a specific form of (passive-receptive) experience of the world and (active-intentional) orientation to the world. These patterns are ultimately only fully revealed in an analysis of subjectivity such as that provided by phenomenology (Zahavi 2007, 73; 2002; on this now also Rosa 2023). The overall structure of such relationships then defines the basic relation to the world (*Weltbeziehung*) of an individual or a community.

At least for modern societies and dominant patterns of subjectivity in those societies, three specific dimensions of *Weltbeziehung* prove to be constitutive; namely *social relations*, *relations* to things or objects, and *selfrelations*. It is no coincidence that Jürgen Habermas and Karl Popper, for example, agree in dividing in an onto-epistemological way, as it were, what we encounter as world, into an objective, a social, and a subjective world (Habermas 1981, 149; Popper 1973).⁷ The field of sensibility and the structure of the will of the subjects then differ accordingly, depending on which of these three aspects of the world they are confronted with. And here it becomes apparent that the institution of property is of cardinal importance for all three dimensions of *Weltbeziehung*. Property establishes a specific form of relationship to things or objects, a characteristic mode of *social* relation and a particular pattern of *self*-relation. In what follows, I would like to elaborate first on these three forms of *Weltbeziehungen*, in order to clarify in the next step how much and in how far these property-mediated patterns of relations are changing in late-modern contemporary society, and finally, in the last step, to provide some insights into what other forms of *Weltbeziehung* are conceivable as a result of an (ongoing) structural change of property.

⁷ Popper, however, does not speak of a “social world,” but he does identify (alongside the subjective and physical worlds) a (socially) “objectified” world of human thought and action.

2. Property as a form of existence: social-, thing- and self-relation

In the first place, the institution of property obviously constitutes and configures a specific relationship to things. In making a thing my property by buying it, for example, I acquire largely unrestricted rights of disposal over it. Property thus characterises a form of placing the world at my disposal: *I can do what I want and when I want it* with my bicycle, my land, and my trousers. I can use them, convert them, lend them, sell them, destroy them, simply leave them lying around, etc., and at the same time, they are protected from *access by others*. I have them at my *free disposal*. Of course, we immediately see that this usually does not mean *unlimited* disposal: I am not allowed to blow my car up; I am not allowed to drive it anywhere I want. Nor am I allowed to build what and how I want on my land, etc., and even if I own a company, I don't have permission to do with it simply as I please. But, with these restrictions, we already are basically touching on the social relations and the social bond of property. Yet, as for the relation to objects, this does not change the fact that we make things available to us through the institution of property.⁸

In becoming "my thing" in this way, however, a second form of relation to objects is established at the same time, as Aristotle already knew, namely, a *relationship of care* (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1262b—1263a). Because this is *my* land, or *my* car, it is important to me that they remain intact, that they are not damaged, are preserved in their value and usability, or even for their own sake. For example, if someone knocks over our bike, we exclaim loudly, "Hey, that's my bike!". The things we have at our disposal as property tend to be "close to our hearts." However, it is important to notice that there are forms of (capitalist) property to which this does not apply at all, such as *shares*. The specific feature of capital ownership seems to be that precisely this conditional relation of care does *not* arise in this case.⁹ I will return to this below.

8 At this starting point, I will refrain from differentiating between possession and property, because it is, to begin with, irrelevant to the phenomenal perspective adopted here. Nevertheless, I agree with Emil Angehrn's observation that *possession* primarily defines a relation to a thing and thus also affects the relation to the self, while *property* primarily describes a social relation. I will return to this in a moment. Cf. Angehrn 1989, here especially 96 f.

9 Georg Simmel elaborated on this difference between abstract and concrete value in a phenomenologically differentiated way in his *Philosophie des Geldes* (Philosophy of money (1989)). Karl Marx and, in a different way, Max Weber also substantiated it on the basis of economics.

The paradigmatic example of such a property-like relation to an object, which has been used again and again in the economic and philosophical discussion of property since the time of John Locke, Adam Smith, and David Ricardo, is one's own plot of land and the little house or flat one owns. "My home is my castle" means that my dwelling is at my disposal, that I take care of it and look after it, that I "appropriate" (*anverwandeln*) it to myself (certainly in Heidegger's sense of "dwelling" (*Wohnen*) as well) (Heidegger 2022), and that it is protected from access by others, including the state.

With this, however, it is now obvious to what extent property simultaneously configures a social relation, or, rather, a whole network of social relations. Subjects encounter each other as owners and thus as competitors for scarce goods to which they want to acquire rights of disposal and custody. In this context, property primarily establishes relations of exclusion: if something is mine, others—individually and collectively—have no access rights to it. It is literally "no longer their business." They can, however, encounter me as customers or clients or as buyers or sellers with whom I do business—this involves the negotiation and redistribution of property, such as when I sell my car or my land (or my block of shares). A certain social obligation then arises in a quasi-natural way from the fact that my use (or misuse or non-use) of property has consequences for others. This includes ecological ones, such as when I let my car rust in the garden, and oil and petrol seep into the groundwater. But this does not change the fact that property first and foremost establishes an exclusive relation of disposal and care.

It is through these property-mediated relations to things and others, however, that a specific form of subjective self-relation is constituted, too: the field of sensibility and the structure of the will of the subjects is directed towards themselves as *owners of specific sections of the world*. In other words, property creates a possessive self-relation, the basic structure of which Hegel already explained in his *Philosophy of Right*. He sharply analyses how the social relations and the self-relation of modern subjects are intertwined when he states:

"The person, distinguishing himself from himself, relates himself to *another* person, and indeed both exist for each other only as owners. Their identity, which exists *as such*, acquires existence through the property of the one becoming the property of the other with a common will and preservation of their right—in the *contract*." (Hegel 1986a, 98)

And in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, he pointedly states: “Property is a possession that belongs to me as this person, in which my person as such comes into existence, into reality” (Hegel 1986b, 126).

Strictly speaking, the property form of the self-relation already results logically from the property form of the relation to the other: self-relation and relation to the (outer) world are always directly correlated and intertwined; every self-relation takes a diversion, so to speak, via a relation to the world outside. This means that modern subjects not only encounter each other but also themselves as owners: *I am the one who owns this house, this car, this job, as well as this coat, this record of music, this book, this jug.* We extend ourselves, as it were, into the world through the things we own. My self-confidence and my self-perception are shaped, for example, by the fact that I live in this flat if I am its owner—but also by the fact that this flat belongs to me if I am its owner and do not live there. Although the effects of (permanent) ownership and property on the self-relation are not the same, they both have a formative influence. We can state that, as a social process, subjectification to a significant degree takes place through the acquisition of property—for example, specific clothing, shoes, books, records, vehicles, digital devices, later perhaps land and residential property, etc. The question “Who am I?” cannot be answered in modern society without reference to property. Subjectivity arises from the interplay of relations of disposal and care that define us as subjects and translates into claims or rights and responsibilities.

As a young child learns to distinguish “mine” from “yours,” his or her sense of self starts to take shape—and it acquires individual traits in the process of adolescence, when the young person begins to demarcate his or her own material, cultural, and spiritual “realm.” Without a doubt, the decision to acquire a certain article of clothing, a particular trainer, book, vehicle, computer game, game controller, tattoo (or whatever else is perceived to be relevant property) proves to be highly relevant for the process of identity formation. *Appropriation* is the process by which a thing becomes property. In the theoretical tradition that runs from Hegel via T.H. Green to contemporary property ethics, we therefore find the conviction that without the right and the practice of freely disposing of certain parts of the world, no subject capable of action can develop because it is the possibilities of experiencing care, planning, and self-efficacy associated with property which provide the chance for “appropriation” (*Anverwandlung*), i.e., for the transformative shaping of the self and the world (cf., for example, Wesche 2014; Brocker 1992).

“Let the individual own nothing but himself, and he will not have a self to own,” Henry Jones stated pointedly already in 1910 (Jones 1910, 94).

The “possessive individualism” so harshly criticised by C.B. Macpherson (Macpherson 1962), according to which the modern individual constitutes his or her self-relation as self-*ownership*, is in this sense not only the dominant ideology of political liberalism but the embodied and habitualised *Weltbeziehung* of modernity. For example, the modern individual possesses school degrees (“I *have* A-levels”), offices (“I *hold* the office of second-in-command in the voluntary fire brigade”), professional titles (“I *have* a profession as a doctor”) and family titles (“I *have* a husband and three children”), and it is through these relations that his or her self-relation is constituted.

In sum, these three dimensions of modern world-relations, constituted in the form of property, result in a *possessive overall world relation* (*Weltbeziehung*) that differs from historically or culturally alternative forms of *Weltbeziehung*, not least in that the modern subject even seems to *possess* his or her thoughts and feelings, moods and inclinations, illnesses and abilities. We tend to say: *I have these thoughts, these feelings, these inclinations, these strengths and weaknesses, or even a disease*. And it is difficult to imagine an alternative here. It could well turn out, however, that such qualities were culturally and historically conceived over far longer periods as *participatory states* rather than *possessive ones*. Phenomenologists from Maurice Merleau-Ponty to Herman Schmitz, for example, have repeatedly pointed out that the notion of “feelings” as located inside a person may be a cardinal modern error: they can be more coherently conceptualised as something “extended and shared” between self and world (Schmitz 2019, 2). In this alternative way of thinking, individuals are afflicted, affected, or involved in feelings, moods, or illnesses rather than “having” them. Experts on Japanese and Chinese speech and thought from Heidegger via Rolf Elberfeld (2012) to Francois Jullien (2022) have, moreover, repeatedly discussed the tendency of Asian thought towards participatory *involvement* in a dynamic world, and many varieties of Renaissance thought also portray self and world as mutually interwoven — *dynamically interpenetrated* — in such a way that fixative, attributive relations of possession are hardly conceptualisable (Taylor 2009).

3. The incipient structural change in property in the 21st century

We do not necessarily have to turn, however, to non-European cultural traditions if we want to try to think of alternative forms of *Weltbeziehung*. In fact, according to the thesis put forward in this contribution, a revolution concerning the possessive world relation (*Weltbeziehung*) constituted in this way is currently emerging. The causes behind this can be found in technical, economic, political, and psychological changes that are happening at the same time and affect all three dimensions of relation — relationships to objects, social relations, and the self relation — equally. Property, it could be said, is no longer what it once was, and therefore its structural function and its cultural meaning are changing (Schuppert 2023).

What exactly does this postulate of a structural change in property mean? The thesis is that the habitualized modern forms of property have become questionable and are in flux under the pressure of current technological developments, economic wealth accumulation in the private sector and debt accumulation on the state side, as well as from geostrategic changes in both extensional and intensional as well as temporal and spatial respects. In an *extensional* sense, property structures are changing insofar as things that were not property before are suddenly subject to being owned — such as planets that turn out to be sources of raw materials; the wind, insofar as it is a source of energy; motherhood, insofar as it can be marketed; DNA sequences that can be patented — or, conversely, things lose or at least change their property form. This latter applies to cultural knowledge, for example, when it is no longer collected in expensive encyclopaedias that can be purchased privately, such as the *Brockhaus* or the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, but can be found in collective, publicly accessible sources such as Wikipedia, which refuses to attribute and market entries as intellectual property because they are of a collective nature.

In general, there is a tendency for the most highly valued cultural goods—the music of Beethoven or Bach, the works of Goethe or Shakespeare, etc.—to become public and freely accessible. That is, they are no longer to be appropriated in the form of private property by buying the books or the recordings, whereas, however, the necessary *infrastructure* (digital devices and streaming services) are expensive.

But this is also obviously changing the intensional meaning of property with respect to social practices as well as for the processes of subjectification. First, it can be noted that, with regard to cultural goods but to some

extent even to the material bearers of the *Weltbeziehung* and our processing of the world, a tendency towards a significant change from *property rights* to *rights of use* can be observed: Subjects no longer buy the things by which they subjectify themselves culturally but acquire temporary rights of use for them. This applies, for example, to music as well as films or books which are accessed and used through streaming services; but analogous practices are beginning to establish themselves in other areas as well so that this tendency can now also be observed for clothing and vehicles (from the scooter left on the street corner to the leased or shared automobile and to the evening dress)—not to mention the digital end devices that remain the property of the provider and are regularly exchanged by him.

This has profound consequences for all three dimensions of *Weltbeziehung*—and thus for the late modern way of *being in the world* as a whole: with regard to relations to objects, it means that the relation of care disappears almost completely. The care and provision of “devices” and “products” is the task and responsibility of the manufacturers and providers—while the right of disposal for customers is clearly restricted: only temporary rights of use are acquired which can expire at any time if the service is terminated or payment obligations are not met. But there are no rights of transmission, marketing, alteration, destruction, etc. In fact, in late-modern capitalist societies, the producers of branded products are systematically dependent on the *absence* of close relationships between users and “things” that lead to consumers being so attached to their appliances, vehicles, or clothes that they do not want to get rid of them and replace them with new ones because they formed intense relations of care with them. Instead, customers are now supposed to keep replacing material things at ever shorter intervals, from smartphones to refrigerators to bicycles, while remaining “loyal” to the brands and service infrastructures.

In terms of *social* relations, cultural and knowledge goods in particular are no longer rival or scarce: they can be multiplied and disseminated without restriction and free of charge (this applies to almost all digital products such as audio recordings, books, films, computer games, software), even though their initial development is of course resource-intensive. This means, however, that such things no longer create competitive social relations, unless, of course, rivalry is artificially created through pecuniary or other access restrictions. Exclusive social relations thus shift from the products that carry the cultural meanings to the material and digital infrastructures as *prerequisites* for their use (not everyone can afford Apple products, Amazon

Prime, or Netflix). If property is understood as the connection between the relations of disposal and care, then it seems obvious that we are dealing with a significant change here.

It is true, of course, that this shift concerns only a small part of material reality and thus of the *Weltbeziehung* mediated by objects in late modern societies. Housing, food, clothing, furnishings, etc. are still predominantly acquired, provided for, and used in the form of private property. But there can be no doubt that the transformations occur in an area which is of great importance for the self-relation mediated by objects. The open research question here is: What consequences does it have for subjects, especially young people, when they no longer own the books, the music, the films, and the games (and perhaps even the clothing) through which they develop their self-relation and define their identity but only (temporarily, as long as they care to and their parents pay the providers and streaming services) *read, listen, watch, play (and wear)* them? What does it mean if they no longer have these things materially present in the cupboard or on the shelf? Phenomenologically speaking, it is obvious that the physical relationship to them is already changing: If we leave aside the clothes, they are no longer materially appropriated but enter the home as an immaterial data stream. This can mean that the processes of appropriation, i.e., the processes by which a subject forms, develops, and defines itself through cultural participation, are also changing—but the significance and extent of such transformations are far from clear yet.

In any case, the tendency analysed so far clearly implies a massive dynamisation in the relation to objects and thus also in the ensuing self-relations. Without doubt, the hope and idea of acquiring and establishing a “home of one’s own” is of central importance, at least for the bourgeois world relation (*Weltbeziehung*). Fencing off a plot of land and building a house—this driving motive, which is tremendously strong in modern capitalist society and provides an orientation far beyond the bourgeois life story, was not designed at first for individual ownership but for permanent, intergenerational family structures. The idea and the desire to leave something to the children one day—a flat, a house, a business—was and still is a motive that provides the possessive world relation with its driving energy. It is through home ownership that the bourgeois self expands into the world and literally finds itself interwoven with its structures: It is in the the workshop, the small garden, the kitchen, the living room, etc., where the propensities and features of the world are (or were) literally assimilated (*einverleibt*) and where

essential relationships with the social and the material world were created. This is where thing, social and self-relations are (or were) shaped. The literal “growing together” between dwelling, furnishings, and subject (which, of course, could only be a lasting reality for those possessing property), described so vividly by Georg Simmel in his *Philosophy of Money*, experienced a progressive loosening in the course of the 19th and above all the 20th century by the very fact that originally immobile, “built-in” housing components such as a stove, table, settee, and sometimes bed became “movables” (*Möbel*) that could be exchanged at historically shorter intervals and less and less often survived their owners (Simmel 1989, 637).

Of importance to me here, however, is the fact that the property constitutive of the possessive *Weltbeziehung* was, in my view, designed in its basic structure for intergenerational duration. As research has been able to show, even in the cradle of late modern neoliberalism, in Pinochet’s Chile, the driving economic motive of the bourgeois classes was not the acquisition of individual property but the accumulation of family property designed for permanence (Basaura i. V.).¹⁰ Such an understanding of property is historically much older and more widespread than the idea of arbitrary individual availability: from Roman law of antiquity to the Chinese tradition of the 19th and 20th centuries, the rights of disposal associated with property were and are rarely individual rights but first and foremost community and above all family rights (Reinhard 2017, especially 27 ff.; Kroker 1959). As Tilo Wesche has mapped out, this intergenerational bridge connects the idea of property with a motif of endurance that points beyond death: property *increases* and solidifies over the life-course of the bourgeois subject while its lifetime simultaneously *decreases* and dwindles (Wesche 2014; 2018).

However, there can hardly be any doubt that this very motivational basic structure of the possessive bourgeois world relation is losing its plausibility and viability in contemporary society. In short, in the late modern stage of “acceleration society” based on the operative mode of dynamic stabilisation, children no longer *want* to have or take over their parents’ *things*: not their furniture, not their clothes, not their vehicles and gardens, and quite often not their houses and flats either and certainly not the small businesses or enterprises that they may have built up. And because the son or daughter of a baker couple hardly (and often in no way) wants to be a baker him-

¹⁰ The strong family inheritance motive is also evident in the pension system, for example, which allows accumulated pension rights to be inherited.

or herself, they distance themselves from the parents' self- and social relations and their relation to objects. Because children often prefer—if they can afford it—to build or acquire residential property near their parents rather than take over the parental home, the idea of building a material world relation for their children (and further generations) is almost obsolete. The idea of permanence now seems to discourage rather than encourage: an inherited house is experienced more as a heavy burden on one's descendants as the spatio-temporal world relation becomes dynamic and as moving remains a constant option, unless of course they *monetise* it. This corresponds to the growing trend to understand home ownership not as a material asset, i.e., in the sense of establishing a material foundation and centre of one's *Weltbeziehung* but as an attractive financial investment and old-age security—and thus as a commodity (Heeg 2013).¹¹ Interestingly, a somewhat similar development is also evident with regard to the acquisition of a car: for young urban middle classes, owning a car no longer establishes a significant self and object relation because it inhibits rather than promotes (hyper)mobility. They *use* various vehicles to get around quickly; they no longer want to *have* them.

If property is to be understood as a link between the relationships of disposal and care, then a fundamental change can be seen precisely in the transition from the material ownership of things to abstract real estate investment, which can be observed in the real estate market: those who live in their own flat have it at their disposal and care for it. Whoever rents out a flat still has that disposal over and care for it, albeit in a mediated, weakened way: they select tenants, conclude tenancy agreements, and are responsible for refurbishment etc. On the other hand, someone who buys shares in a real estate fund does not even know, as a rule, which properties he or she owns shares in: she has no disposal over it and he does not care, except for the value of the investment. This form of property does not establish any relation to a thing at all and, as Simmel also noted, no substantial self-relation either precisely because it is not connected to any specific “realm of the world.” Wherever property ultimately exists as fungible fund shares that are bought and sold by computer algorithms in fractions of a second, this development is taken to the extreme insofar as the two basic relations of property have completely evaporated. Owning shares, being rich, or having a high income is certainly of great importance for the resource endowment of individuals, but it can-

11 The SFB's sub-project A07 (“Habitat as collateral: Indebted property and financialisation”), led by Ute Tellmann, is also conducting research on this topic.

not as such form the basis for a sustainable, subjectivising self-relation because it is, as it were, of *no quality*: it does not establish a relation between the self and a qualitatively determined part of the world; it is indifferent to specific life contents and life purposes (Angehrn 1989, 107, following Simmel). As “possessions,” the *little house*, the *allotment garden*, the *Mercedes*, or the *Peugeot bicycle*, and the *private library*, the *record collection*, or the *Brockhaus encyclopaedia* all “form” a subject in a qualitative way. Money as “pure potency” does not do that.

According to the argument developed so far, the structural change of property with regard to the relations of self, thing and social relations that it founds and establishes is thus reflected in the fact that the relationships of care and disposal in the realm of things is transformed into a relationship of temporary use without any obligation to care and, precisely because of this, the quality of subjectification of things is at least changed, if not reduced. Self-relations are re-configured as (flexible) user relations. In the social dimension, the competitive form of relationship remains dominant, but the rivalry now relates less to concrete things and sections of the world than to what one could call economic “utilisation potency” or range of disposal. This is determined by the total volume of economic, cultural, social, and physical capital. What does this mean for the transformation of late modern world relations (*Weltbeziehung*)?

4. Conclusion: From a possessive to a participatory *Weltbeziehung*?

At first glance, it may seem as if the late modern *Weltbeziehung* is being transformed from a basically *possessive* one back into a more *participatory* one: people participate as users in all kinds of services and events, they use buildings, means of transport, infrastructures, and devices without owning them and without having to enter into specific obligations of care for them that go beyond the usual duties of care. And indeed, this shift seems to be mirrored in other areas of life as well: Ideally speaking, late-modern subjects no longer “have” a profession but (temporarily) pursue one; nor do they “have” a spouse but (for the time being) live with someone; perhaps one can even say that they also no longer “have” friends but are friends and such friendship only shows and sustains itself in the execution.

But this impression of a transition from a possessive to a participatory *Weltbeziehung* is deceptive. The relation of use is not participatory in a genuine sense but rests, as it were, on “dead property” (*tote Habe*) (Fromm 1979), namely on economic assets in the form of a shrunken form of property. Because almost all of the participatory and especially material world relations (from living to working to eating and to all expressions of consumption) are “paid,” they continue to be based on an encapsulated possessive world relation. People “have” economic assets, and thus a given scope and horizon of possibilities of use in the form of abstract numbers on their accounts. By “using” them, they redeem themselves of any participatory care obligations and secure temporary exclusive rights of use. In short, one has to “have” capital to *buy* participation. In the social dimension, they compete less for concrete goods or “parts of the world” than for the same volume of numbers: the social relation becomes a purely competitive relation, because whenever and wherever the account balance rises in one place, it must fall somewhere else.

My thesis is thus that the currently observable structural change in property undermines the basic structure of property as a combination of a disposal and a care relation, which gave the capitalist development of the last 250 years a robust and more or less solid foundation, and at the same time radicalises the possessive world relation (*Weltbeziehung*) into a shrinking form which exacerbates the competitive relation in the social dimension, reinforces the ecologically problematic side of the relation to things—insofar as it eliminates the relationship of care to things that goes hand in hand with classical ownership—and finally also forfeits, or at least reduces, the ability to create sustainable self-relations.

If we are not to lapse into persistent cultural pessimism about this, the question arises powerfully as to what alternatives to a possessive world relation are even conceivable. As I have already indicated, such alternatives seem to me to lie in the possibility of genuinely participatory *Weltbeziehungen* in which people take care of things and “parts of the world” and participate in them without “having” them. Indigenous traditions and ways of life can certainly provide examples of this: Forests, rivers, and the plants and animals that live in them can be used, for example, and people can care for them without their being considered and experienced as property and without this having to be regulated by corresponding legal claims. And indeed: in late modern contemporary society, microforms of new sharing practices can be observed in many places—sometimes born out of necessity, sometimes out of weariness with the capitalist order, and sometimes emerging as an unintended

side effect of technological developments—in which the most diverse actors experiment for the sake of the most diverse interests and in very different ways.¹² Certainly, the habitus, interest and interpretation patterns of possessive relations to thing, self and others will continue to dominate for the time being. But, especially in the field of digital production and consumption, a critical threshold seems to have been crossed in many places that makes it difficult to maintain a possessive world relation: this applies to impressive knowledge structures like Wikipedia, which not only do not “belong” to anyone but also make the concept of intellectual authorship questionable, to new sampling techniques in music, to open source software, to works of art produced by AI, etc.¹³ The liquidation of the late-modern *Weltbeziehung* as a result of the structural change in property therefore makes it quite conceivable that a new form of existence one day will emerge from this.

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12 In fact, the empirical research in the SFB sub-project C06 (“Making Things Available. Property as a Specific Form of World Relationship”), led by Jörg Oberthür and myself, was able to show how much sharing practices motivate, sometimes even force, the subjects involved to openly “renegotiate” their relations to things, social relations, and self-relations. In particular, when “couch surfing,” i.e. temporarily sharing their own flat with strangers, they experience that “their” coffee cup or even their bathroom are suddenly no longer so readily “theirs,” that they suddenly feel like a guest in their own kitchen when the guests are cooking and that the relationship with the “strangers” and “clients” tends to mix with the elements of a friendship and proximity relationship. Equally interesting here seems to be the fact that people who participate in car-sharing practices are not sure whether and to what extent the car they have been driving for a few days is somehow “their” car—and are surprised that they start greeting people they meet in traffic in other cars from the same car-sharing agency as their own kind: Here, too, thing, self, and social relations seem to be in flux in a peculiar way. On car-sharing, see also Henning in the present volume. Cf. also Bhandar et al. 2021 on the uncertainty in all three dimensions of world relations.

13 This area forms the object of investigation of sub-project C04 (“Intellectual property. Social embedding and functional equivalents”) under the direction of Tilman Reitz and Sebastian Sevig-nani.

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