



Financialization re-imagined



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Aris Komporozos-Athanasiou, *Speculative Communities: Living with Uncertainty in a Financialized World*, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 2022, 186 pp., \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-81602-9

In the second volume of *The Principle of Psychology*, William James entertains the hypothesis that emotions – at least ‘coarser’ ones such as fear, anger, sadness – follow bodily expressions. “We feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble” and not the other way around (James, 1890: 450). When I first read James’ outline of his hypothesis, I was baffled and immediately began to think of times I had expressed so-called coarse emotions. Had I ever felt sorry because I cried? Maybe. Been afraid because I trembled? Possibly. Regardless of whether James was right in turning common knowledge about the sequential relation between emotion and bodily expression on its head, his against-the-grain thinking fascinated me and reminded me of the importance of creativity and persistence in theorizing.

When reading Aris Komporozos-Athanasiou’s new book, *Speculative Communities*, I am struck by the same unsettling ambiguousness I got from reading James. *Speculative Communities* challenges the reader to think along unconventional lines, even when it rubs the intuitive understanding the wrong way. It is in this sense that the book reminds me of some of James’ more peculiar propositions about the mind and the social. I have rarely come across a more theoretically innovative, thematically daring, and thought-provoking piece of scholarship. Though relatively short – just shy of 150 pages – the book is tremendously rich. Its three parts (‘I: Speculation’, ‘II: Spectacle’, ‘III: Specter’) cover immense ground. We meet commodities traders and bucket shop speculators battling each other over whose *speculative imagination* should determine the future of futures trading in late-eighteenth-century Chicago; millennials embracing experiential transience and new media community on *speculative technologies* like TikTok, YouTube, and even astrology apps; daters sometimes carefully, other times callously, swiping their way through potential love interests in search of *speculative intimacies*; far right populist movements leveraging their *speculative politics*, hoping to actualize their idiosyncratic visions of a certain *speculative community*; and other protest movements – mainly from the opposite side of the political spectrum – obfuscating the institutional order of financial capitalism by means of *counter-speculation*. All of this to catch glimpses of and develop a

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vocabulary through which to describe social life in times of political gyrations, contested institutional frameworks, attacks on democracy, and a seemingly ever more invasive financial capitalism creeping in on our uncertainty-ridden existence. Or, as Komporozos-Athanasίου puts it in the introduction, to make sense of finance's "impact on the ways we respond to our epoch's profound challenges, not just in the sphere of the economy but across all realms of contemporary life" (pp. 1-2).

The main argument of the book is that besides transforming the institutions and economies of contemporary capitalist societies, finance's "speculative forces" significantly influence the constitution of "our modern imagined communities" (pp. 1-2). Hence, it is preoccupied with the ways in which finance and, more specifically, speculation intrudes on and shapes people's imagination and their efforts to navigate a volatile present in the shadows of uncertain futures. Financial capitalism is not inoculating the social body with instrumental reasoning, performatively turning everyone into replicates of the homo economicus, but rather with a speculative, risk-prone mindset – akin yet not entirely identical to Keynesian *animal spirits* or *enterprise* – that encourages people to broker their own and other people's imagined futures. Elaborating on this re-imagined financialization of everyday life, Komporozos-Athanasίου argues that,

as we are increasingly impatient with capitalism's future promises, our imagination becomes more and more speculative in nature, ranging from our choices of partners to our choices of government. At the same time, speculative imagination determines our capacity to hedge ourselves against future uncertainty and broken promises surrounding work security, home ownership, and life fulfillment. Speculative communities, in that sense, are formed around neither calculating reason nor irrational passions – they are propped up by the spirit of finance, which fuses logic and feeling into a generative speculative imagination. (pp. 3-4)

Thus, the kind of financialization critically scrutinized in *Speculative Communities* is a generative force or *spirit* making its imprint on the ways individuals and groups imagine and enact futures.

Of the many theorists from whom Komporozos-Athanasίου draws inspiration in his patching together of the book's neat, yet comprehensive conceptual apparatus, Benedict Anderson and Cornelius Castoriadis stand out as being the most central. Anderson's work on imagined communities and Castoriadis' theorization of imagination in his political philosophy are the molds out of which Komporozos-Athanasίου's concepts of *speculative communities* and *speculative imagination* are cast. Moreover, these works – and Castoriadis' in particular – are used to position the concept of *imagination* as an essential gateway to understanding the enactment of the social. Following Castoriadis, Komporozos-Athanasίου stresses that imagination is neither mere fantasy nor something passively received from 'the outside'. In fact, imagination is a thoroughly social phenomenon that "precedes and anticipates" reality, with reality being "nothing but imagination's ongoing outcome" (p. 57). Komporozos-Athanasίου acknowledges the radicality of this social constructivist stance but, at the same time, argues it can help us better understand finance and its role in society:

Through accepting that radical thesis according to which imagination precedes both reason and affect, we can better understand the historical enmities and alliances among speculating camps in and around financial markets. Finance is not merely a conduit for traversing between the worlds of the real and the fictitious nor between the rational and the irrational. It is a space where these worlds no longer remain insulated from each other. Doomed to permanently inhabit the precipice of the unknown, farmers, workers, populists, and derivatives traders have no choice but to turn to their speculative imaginations – to speculate in order to survive. (p. 60)

Like James' topsy-turvy of the intuitive understanding of the relationship between emotion and bodily reaction, Komporozos-Athanasίου's take on imagination and imaginative meaning-making molded by widespread financialization is bafflingly thought-provoking. This against-the-grain thinking also prompts him – in the book's fifth chapter on financial populism and new nationalism – to pose and grapple with the controversial question, “has finance... revitalized rather than ‘undone the demos’”? (p. 102) He surely does not shy away from challenging conventional wisdom, which is refreshing.

At times, however, these admirable efforts to unfold and stitch together a vast arsenal of concepts with the wide range of expressions of uncertain existence in a financialized world makes it appear as if financial capitalism has completely engulfed the world and that the social body has become financialized through-and-through. Radical uncertainty is pervasive, acceleration the order of the day, and speculation a human condition. At times, the language of speculation, uncertainty, opacity, acceleration, and so on, becomes performative, which makes it difficult to determine if there is in fact an outside to this thoroughly financialized, uncertain, speculative, and accelerated modern mode of existence. An example of this seeming inescapability and pervasiveness of uncertainty in everyday (financialized) life is found in a discussion of data in the book's third chapter on speculative technologies:

Data's promise of more and better knowledge remains elusive. Our growing dependence on complex machines and opaque algorithms doesn't make the world more legible or its impending crisis more predictable – our ways of seeing are shifting, yet darkness doesn't seem to go away. (p. 64)

Apart from being an example of how remarkably well-written *Speculative Communities* is, this passage implies that big data analytics tools do not contribute to a mitigation of uncertainty. The idea that attempts to domesticate uncertainty – in financial markets and beyond – will prove futile and instead just create more uncertainty is quite common (e.g., Esposito, 2011). However, that does not mean that the “complex machines and opaque algorithms” on which we increasingly depend cannot render intelligible what was previously considered unfathomable. It rather seems to be a question of uncertainties potentially multiplying elsewhere when such technologies are deployed. My point is that (big) data in conjunction with the analytics tools used to process them do seem to keep their promise, at least part of the way. They do help make many things more predictable and thus, less uncertain. But, at the same time, uncertainties pop up elsewhere in association with, for instance, the comprehensibility or lack thereof of certain (machine learning) algorithms' operations (Hansen and Borch, 2021). And then there is the more existential and anxiety-inducing uncertainties of being, in various ways, subjected to these technologies. In the beautiful final part of the above quote (“our ways of seeing are shifting, yet darkness doesn't seem to go away”), Komporozos-Athanasίου alludes to the fact that datafication and technologization bring about epistemological shifts, but I would have loved if the book had a more comprehensive discussion of the ‘darkness’ or perhaps rather *darknesses* – that is, the plurality of uncertainties toward which people are exposed.

When discussing the role of technologies, data, and digital media in all this, Komporozos-Athanasίου points to “the growing convergence of financialization and digitization”, arguing that social media and other digital platforms are speculative technologies that “bind economic, social, and even intimate spaces together – and, in doing so, animate finance capitalism in ways that have not yet been fully understood” (p. 67). I find this to be a profound insight that adds a new dimension to the existing important scholarly discussions of *platformization* in finance (Langley and Leyshon, 2017, 2021; Westermeier, 2020) by also

taking into account the financialization of platforms. The general commotion around meme stocks, the GameStop debacle in early 2021, the controversy around Robinhood's gamified social trading platform, and the booming and anti-establishment world of cryptocurrencies are expressions of this convergence between financialization and digitization, financial infrastructures and digital media platforms. One central implication of this is exactly that the social, private, political, and financial spheres become entangled and consequently influence each other. The speculative rationale of the market influences how people organize and orchestrate digital communities – whether it is love-seekers on dating apps or protest movements mobilizing on social media platforms – just as this organizing, orchestration, and mobilization influences marketeers in return.

Although I have only been able to cover some of the book's many interesting themes and concepts (the fascinating concepts *homo speculans* and *real fake* are, for instance, notable omissions), it should be clear by now that *Speculative Communities* is not just another critique of neoliberalism-inflected financial capitalism. It is a novel and audacious attempt to construct a conceptual framework with which it becomes possible to articulate and address major questions concerning our economies, our financial system, our democratic institutions, and our increasingly digital technology-mediated lives. Moreover, it is a truly original book and a great political sociology contribution to the already rich literatures on financialization in economic sociology (e.g., social studies of finance) and political economy (e.g., critical macro finance).

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