



Adorno and Marx: Negative Dialectics and the Critique of Political Economy

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Theodor W. Adorno's apparent aversion and repulsion to matters of economy have been well-documented within Anglophone critical-theoretical literature. In a philosophical-political profile written shortly after the death of his former mentor, Jürgen Habermas goes so far as to suggest that "Adorno was not bothered with political economy."¹ Of course, the inverse image of this tends to be associated with Karl Marx, who is often said to have introduced a vulgar base-superstructure model and hence a form of economic reductionism into social critique and cultural analysis. Whereas Adorno is charged with paying *too little* attention to economic issues, Marx conventionally stands accused of dealing *too much* or even solely with the economy. These conventional interpretations and standard images of both thinkers

1 Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. F.G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 109, cited in: Niko Bobka and Dirk Braustein, "Adorno and the Critique of Political Economy," trans. L. Fischer, in *Adorno and Marx: Negative Dialectics and the Critique of Political Economy*, eds. Werner Bonefeld and Chris O'Kane (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 35.

are taken to task, challenged, and destabilized in a new and vital book titled *Adorno and Marx: Negative Dialectics and the Critique of Political Economy*, edited by Werner Bonefeld and Chris O’Kane. In the pages of this volume, an altogether different picture of both thinkers emerges, as we get to know an Adorno who is particularly attentive to the subtleties of Marx’s critique of political economy, as well as a Marx that is decidedly less dogmatic and economic than is still commonly assumed, even within the established circles of Critical Theory.

The introductory chapter of the collection, co-written by the editors, sets the stage for the rest of the book by elucidating what is at stake in *thinking the critique of political economy as a critical social theory*. This particular phrasing—critique of political economy as critical social theory—already captures the programmatic intent of the book as a whole, running as a guiding thread through its individual contributions.² The intellectual origins of this project date back to the late 1960s, when some of Adorno’s former students, most prominently Hans-Georg Backhaus and Helmut Reichelt, inaugurated what subsequently came to be known as the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* (New Reading of Marx, or NRM).³ As Backhaus points out in his seminal essay “On the Dialectics of the Value-Form,” Marx’s mature project is engaged with a *critique* of political economy rather than the construction of a critical political economy or alternative economic theory.⁴ Accordingly, some commentators have pointed out that Marx’s theory of value might be more accurately described as a value theory of labor rather than a Ricardian or substantialist labor theory of value.⁵ In this reading, Marx distinguishes himself from the discourse of classical political economy, to which his corpus is often so easily and wrongfully assimilated, precisely through his analysis of the *social forms* that wealth and labor assume under the historically specific social relations of capital. Such an analysis in terms of social forms has subsequently been taken up in the Anglophone world by various so-called value-form theorists like Simon Clarke, Moishe Postone, Patrick Murray, and Tony Smith. This subterranean strand of critical theory—as

2 The phrase “critique of political economy as critical social theory” can already be found in Bonefeld’s earlier writing, cf. Werner Bonefeld, *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy: On Subversion and Negative Reason* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 2.

3 Riccardo Bellofiore and Tommaso Redolfi Riva, “The Neue Marx-Lektüre: Putting the Critique of Political Economy Back into the Critique of Society,” *Radical Philosophy* 189 (2015): 24–36.

4 Hans-Georg Backhaus, “On the Dialectics of the Value-Form,” *Thesis Eleven* 1, no. 1 (February 1980): 94–98.

5 Diane Elson, “The Value Theory of Labour,” in *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capitalism*, ed. Diane Elson (London: Verso, 1979), 123; cf. Michael Heinrich, *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert: Die Marxsche Kritik der politischen Ökonomie zwischen wissenschaftlicher Revolution und klassischer Tradition* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2006).

O’Kane proposes to call it at one point, setting it up against hegemonic critical theory—shares a rejection of what more traditional Marxist accounts took to be transhistorical givens, such as the primacy of economic forces, class struggle, and the conception that labor as such is the ontological source of wealth. Instead, these theorists pursue the Marxian project along the lines of a thorough critique of economic categories by revealing them as historically specific rather than transhistorical, and of economic reality as such by pointing out its socially constituted nature, despite appearing as “first nature.”

The book’s remaining essays are divided into three parts, the first part being devoted to Adorno and his relation to the NRM, taking a broadly reconstructive angle. Bonefeld’s contribution to this section (one of his four contributions to the volume overall) cuts right to some of the core issues that are subsequently developed and discussed within this collection. In Bonefeld’s account, the task of critical theory is oriented to dissolving the natural appearance of capitalist society as an expression of “economic nature.” Such a subversive critique of economic objectivity draws upon concepts like “real abstraction”—a notion coined by Alfred Sohn-Rethel—and Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism. In capitalist society, individuals are governed by alien economic laws and external objects that appear to reproduce themselves independently behind the backs of individuals. The alienated existence of capitalist social structures vis-à-vis individuals, however, is not simply a subjective illusion. Instead, it is an objective and socially necessary illusion, one that is rooted in real practices of commodity exchange, as Adorno points out in a remarkable seminar transcript from 1962 on “Marx and the Basic Concepts of Sociological Theory,” which is included as an appendix to the book.

What are we to make of this “conceptuality which holds sway in reality itself,” as Adorno put it in a famous passage from “Sociology and Empirical Research?”⁶ In order to clarify what is at stake here, it is useful to look more closely at the equivalent exchange of non-equivalents implicit in the capitalist practice of commodity exchange. What remains obscured and hidden from view in the apparently free and equal act of exchange is the fact that commodity labor-power possesses the unique capacity to create more value than it receives in the form of the wage. Adorno was well aware that the realization of value in the sphere of circulation is hence fundamentally premised on the creation of surplus value in the sphere of production.⁷ As Niko Bobka and Dirk Braunstein point out in their richly detailed and insightful contribution to the book, it is

6 Theodor W. Adorno, “Sociology and Empirical Research,” in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, eds. T. W. Adorno, H. Albert, et al. (London: Heinemann, 1977), 80.

7 Adorno even goes so far as to suggest that the doctrine of surplus value is “the centerpiece of Marxian theory,” cited in Bobka and Braunstein, “Adorno and the Critique of Political Economy,” 37.

precisely “the equality in the process of exchange [that] reproduces the inequality of classes and individuals.”⁸ Against the standard interpretation of Adorno’s writings, and especially its reception in the Anglophone world, the essays collected in the first section of the book demonstrate quite clearly that Adorno engaged seriously with the nuances of Marx’s critique of political economy. It is particularly interesting to observe in this context that—for Adorno as much as for Marx—the vertical relations of class domination and horizontal relations of value, under which all members of society are subsumed, are in fact distinct yet interrelated, in the sense that neither of them is immediately reducible to the other.⁹ Whereas the aforementioned value-form theorists are frequently accused of neglecting class struggle, the contributions collected in this section—those by Bonefeld and Charlotte Baumann in particular—illustrate how class domination and human suffering remain the non-conceptual premises of the economic categories of bourgeois discourse.

The second section of the book revolves around the contemporary relevance of thinking of the critique of political economy as a negative dialectic of society and contains some of the most original and thought-provoking essays in the book. Picking up on some of the themes and concepts discussed earlier in the book, Charles Andrew Prusik’s essay turns to Adorno’s critique of positivism in order to illuminate and criticize the neoliberal phase of capitalism. Even though Adorno did not live long enough to witness the emergence of neoliberalism in the 1970s, Prusik does an impressive job of rendering Adorno’s insights on society as a dialectical process of subject-object mediation intelligible and adequate for a critique of neoliberalism, both as theoretical discourse and as political practice. Whereas Adorno has oftentimes been read as a critic of the totally administered industrial society, levelling a criticism that is then supposed to have limited validity only for the post-war era of the Fordist-Keynesian class compromise, all the essays comprising this section of the book run against the grain of such interpretations. As O’Kane points out in his important contribution on negative totality and permanent catastrophe, “the very technological developments Adorno discussed in ‘Late Capitalism’ led to overaccumulation and the inflation he indicated, laying the groundwork for an economic slowdown in the early 1970s.”¹⁰

8 Bobka and Braunstein, “Adorno and the Critique of Political Economy,” 37.

9 Although initially coined by Robert Brenner, this distinction between horizontal and vertical relations is taken from another recent brilliant intervention in Marxist scholarship, see Søren Mau, *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Theory of the Economic Power of Capital* (London: Verso, 2023), 175ff.

10 Chris O’Kane, “‘Society Maintains Itself Despite All Catastrophes that May Eventuate’: Critical Theory, Negative Totality, and Permanent Catastrophe,” in *Adorno and Marx: Negative Dialectics and the Critique of Political Economy*, eds. Werner Bonefeld and Chris O’Kane (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 173.

One of the clearest expressions of this “dynamic of disintegration through growing integration”—as O’Kane has it, alluding to Adorno’s *Philosophical Elements of a Theory of Society*—is perhaps to be found in the rise of surplus populations, i.e., those who are rendered obsolete and superfluous to the requirements of capital.¹¹ This brings us directly to Fabian Arzuaga’s outstanding contribution to the volume, wherein he analyzes Marx’s notion of surplus populations alongside Adorno’s thesis on the liquidation of the individual. The core argument of this highly original and creative contribution is that “the liquidation of the individual applies not only to the superfluity of bourgeois individuality as anthropological type but also to actually living individuals.”¹² Lacking both the jobs to survive within capitalism and the means to survive outside of it, these surplus populations are increasingly dependent on the informal economy to acquire their means of living and are continuously exposed to conditions of vulnerability, precarity, and ultimately fungibility. Arzuaga clearly ties the phenomenon of surplus populations to the temporal dynamics of capitalist value production, yet the exact relationship between the latter’s reproduction through the mute compulsion of economic relations and the extra-economic and direct violence exercised in the management and containment of surplus populations remains undertheorized, as it lies beyond the scope of this chapter.

This draws attention, however, to a more general question that remains somewhat conspicuously absent throughout the volume as a whole: how should we think of the unfolding of the value-form and the “inner” dialectics of capitalism in relation to its “outer” dialectics, expressed in the ongoing necessity of primitive accumulation, the history of colonialism, the rise of informality, and the persistence of slavery within the capitalist world economy? Such questions have been at the center of Marxist debates since Rosa Luxemburg, at least, and continue to play a role in current discussions surrounding David Harvey’s notion of “accumulation by dispossession.” The thrust of these arguments is that the accumulation of capital systemically requires non-capitalist “outsides” in order to realize surplus value, thereby establishing a necessary and conceptual rather than contingent and historical connection between capitalism, on the one hand, and colonialism and imperialism, on the other.¹³ Although it might be questionable to conceive of

- 11 Adorno touches on the phenomenon of superfluity via a discussion of automation in his lecture on “Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism,” see Theodor W. Adorno, *Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 5.
- 12 Fabian Arzuaga, “The Liquidation of the Individual as Critique of Political Economy,” in *Adorno and Marx: Negative Dialectics and the Critique of Political Economy*, eds. Werner Bonefeld and Chris O’Kane (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 131.
- 13 Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital* (London: Routledge, 2003), 332; David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 138ff.

these hinterlands as unmediated externalities to the capitalist social totality, these approaches nonetheless raise important questions concerning core and periphery dynamics in today's global capitalism.¹⁴ Furthermore, more recent debates have moved to understanding how the homogenizing tendency of the value-form actually works in tandem with the production of social difference along racialized and gendered lines.¹⁵ The observation that capitalist history moves in two contradictory directions at once would not have been a surprise to Marx, nor would the idea that capitalist identity simultaneously presupposes its non-identity have been alien to Adorno.¹⁶ For this reason, the relatively meagre engagement with these pressing issues is a missed opportunity, not only in light of these systematic debates, but especially in view of current feminist, anti-racist, and abolitionist struggles.¹⁷

The rather bleak and pessimistic diagnosis that transpires throughout the pages of the first two sections of the book then ultimately begs the question as to what sort of political practice is required to bring capital and its regressive tendencies to a halt. In a world overdetermined by capital, how can we break the spell of reified society? Although the third part of the book is dedicated to questions of social praxis, the reader who is looking for ready-made political prescriptions does so in vain here, which certainly comes as no surprise to those familiar with both Marx's and Adorno's methodological commitments to negativity in social theory. What is equally clear, however, is that the stakes for any political practice confronting the abject misery of contemporary capitalism are dizzyingly high. As O'Kane and Kirstin Munro so brilliantly point out in their chapter on Postone's critique of Marxian economics, such a political practice must move beyond distribution-centered conceptions of capital-

14 Cf. Phil A. Neel, *Hinterland: America's New Landscape of Class and Conflict* (Chicago: Reaktion Books, 2020); and Martín Arboleda, *Planetary Mine: Territories of Extraction Under Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2020).

15 See the contributions to the special issue of *Historical Materialism* on "Race and Capital," *Historical Materialism* 31, no. 2/3 (Jan 2024), <https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/journal/issue-3123-race-and-capital/>. Lukas Egger points to the neglected work of Peter Schmitt-Egner, whose attempts to develop a value-form theory of racism in the 1970s are documented in Lukas Egger, "Reduced to British Nature: On Racism and the Law of Value," in *Historical Materialism* 32, no.2 (Jan 2024).

16 In a letter to Walter Benjamin, Adorno touches on the relationship between the world market and imperialism through a brief discussion of the arcade and the bazaar, see Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), 118. For an alternative Adorno-inspired account that focuses on the permanence of primitive accumulation, see Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt, *History and Obstinacy*, trans. R. Langston (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

17 It should be noted that Bonefeld has elsewhere convincingly argued that capitalist accumulation contains the violence of primitive accumulation in its very concept, see Werner Bonefeld, "Primitive Accumulation and Capitalist Accumulation: Notes on Social Constitution and Expropriation," *Science and Society* 75, no. 3 (2011): 379-399.

ism as well as conceptions of socialism that are focused on the realization of labor rather than its abolition. Neither Adorno nor Marx ethically privileges the standpoint of labor, in a limited or expanded sense. As such, the book represents an important intervention in contemporary debates on critical theory and capitalism, and offers a stimulating counterpoint to both Rahel Jaeggi's practice-theoretical articulation of "a wide concept of economy," as well as Nancy Fraser's insistence on the need for an expanded conception of capitalism.¹⁸ The true genius of Adorno's interpretation of Marx perhaps lies precisely in this: that the categories of Marx's critique of political economy are never purely or merely economic but are always already about society writ large. Adorno therefore elucidates what it means *to engage in the critique of political economy as critical social theory*. Together with the *SAGE Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory* (2018), which was edited by O'Kane, Bonefeld, and Beverley Best, this edited volume provides invaluable resources for those interested in thinking, criticizing, and contesting the present political conjuncture—with Adorno and Marx.

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18 Rahel Jaeggi, "A Wide Concept of Economy: Economy as Social Practice and the Critique of Capitalism," in *Critical Theory in Critical Times: Transforming the Global Political and Economic Order*, eds. Penelope Deutscher and Cristina Lafont (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 160-179; Nancy Fraser, "Behind Marx's Hidden Abode: For an Expanded Conception of Capitalism," in *Critical Theory in Critical Times: Transforming the Global Political and Economic Order*, eds. Penelope Deutscher and Cristina Lafont (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 141-159.