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Capitalism's Future

Alienation, Emancipation and Critique

Edited by

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CHAPTER 3

Left Thatcherism: Recent Critical Theory and Post-Marxism(s) in the Light of Marxian Social Ontology

Christian Lotz

As Marxists, we believe that politics, in the end is derivative of the material reality of economic and class relations. That's a very, very profound statement by Karl Marx, so long as it is understood properly, so long as it's not mechanical. The bottom line is this statement means that not everything is possible through politics.

KOUVELAKIS 2015

Introduction

By now it has become the central aim of French post-Marxist thought and critical theorists of the Frankfurt School alike to develop critical theory further towards overcoming central features of Marxian theory, especially his critique of political economy. What is at stake in post-structuralist inspired philosophy and post-Adornian Frankfurt School theorizing is the rejection of a dialectical conception of society that operates with strong assumptions about both the reconstruction of the totality of society as well as the foundations of social ontology in social-economic terms. Arguing against these assumptions two other foundations of the social have been put forward, namely, on the one hand, the claim found in post-structuralist inspired thought (Badiou, Ranciere, Laclau) that the social is founded on the political, and, on the other hand, the claim advanced in recent Frankfurt School inspired thought (Habermas, Honneth, Jaeggi, Forst) that the social is founded on the ethical. Both philosophical schools advance a position that ultimately leads to the rejection of any dialectical conception of society and to the idea, even if not always explicitly stated, that the social is constituted by something *external* to the social. This, in turn, leads to the consequence that Marx's conception of the capitalist world as a *specific* world constituted by the value form gets lost and is replaced by universal and, at least tentatively, a-historical concepts. As a consequence, the critique and analysis of capitalism is no longer the central task of recent philosophies in the critical tradition(s), since the principle of valorized labor gets

replaced by other concepts, such as recognition, communication, and rhetoric. It is the concept of capital, accordingly, that is lacking from current social and political philosophy, which leads to an idealization of the political itself by pushing either power and discourse or identity into the center of Marxist theory. The dividing line, accordingly, is the question of whether we can philosophically defend dialectics over ontology and ethics. This dividing line especially applies to Badiou's currently very popular attempt to present a militant politics beyond capitalism. As Badiou argues, the question of the political is not a question about classes, movements and other agents; rather, as he especially argues against Negri, it is a question of how to organize a mass under the heading of an idea to which each militant political individual subjects herself. This idea, according to Badiou, is the communist idea. This position, as I will argue, falls back onto an empty and abstract determination of a political subject (and capitalism) that is stripped of her social position, and, we might say, is the sad expression of what could be called *Left Thatcherism*.

Against this move, in the following I will try to recover some of the basics of a Marx-inspired social ontology by arguing that only the principle of labor and its social form can help us see the finitude of this social form. Only if we operate with a dialectical concept of society, are we able to come to a concept of society that is in its very form finite. Any other position, I submit, remains ultimately positivistic. Following Adorno, I also argue that a theory of society necessarily needs to assume a principle under which the totality of society, i.e. "society," can be thought (i.e., exchange, capital, money, etc.). With this position I am in sharp disagreement with philosophers such as Laclau. According to Laclau, who primarily understands by "society" the political antagonisms contained in it, the plurality of contemporary struggles and social antagonisms always transcend social totality, and, hence, society becomes "an ultimate impossibility" (Laclau 2014, 165). The deconstructivist idea of the *impossibility of society*, has, by now, become something like a mantra for almost an entire generation of post-Marxist philosophers, with, perhaps, the exception of Negri and Žižek. Almost all contemporary "post-Marxist" philosophers reject the primacy of the relations of production, and the "standpoint of reproduction" (Althusser). Post-Marxist philosophers like to argue that there are principles that are independent from social reproduction, such as the "constituent passion of the multitude," "agonistic action," "direct action," the "people," or other speculative roots of social reality. As a consequence, these speculations about the political make the social a secondary principle, and it is precisely this thesis that is in conflict with the standpoint of reproduction. In my view, the major problem is that most post-Marxists no longer ask for the condition of the possibility for thinking about political agents *within* a society unified by a specific

form of thinghood [*Gegenständlichkeitsform*] (Lukács). Against post-Marxists I advance a rather classical position by arguing that we need to return to Marx's thesis that political and ethical possibilities depend upon the historical level of productive forces and its immanent social relations (on this point I agree with Negri).

The Primacy of the Political: Badiou, Ranciere, Laclau¹

The most prominent candidate of the aforementioned new left Thatcherism, despite its political radicalism and Maoist background, is Alain Badiou's attempt to think politics as philosophy, which is to say, as truth related. Badiou's ontology is characterized by the central concept of the event. Events are truth related occurrences that restructure the entire reality. Badiou assumes that there are four such events that constitute truth, namely, politics, art, science, and love. Events cannot be foreseen strategically and they bring about a "truth procedure" that carries with it a radical restructuring of everything that exists in historical situations, which, as such, remain singular. Events cannot be planned or instrumentally brought about, but if they occur, the reality of a singular situation changes in its relations and its utterances, as well as with respect to the things that make up this singular situation. As we can see already here, the social does not appear on Badiou's list of truth relevant events and it is treated particularly in relation to politics, as a secondary area, given that for Badiou political events are ultimately constituted *outside* of existing social-economic frameworks. Politics, accordingly, is an event that functions as the ultimate ground of the social, *external* to the social, because social organization always is rooted in historically relevant (re)organizations of the social reality through events that are truth related.² As Marchart puts it, Badiou's true politics operates within the "register of the real" and cannot be translated into social relations (Marchart 2010, 160). It comes at no surprise, then, that for Badiou [a] classes only exist in concrete practical confrontations, but are nothing in themselves, and [b] Marxism is neither a philosophy nor a theory, but primarily a political praxis that is constituted through the idea of equality:

¹ Parts of the following section appeared in German in Lotz 2014b.

² Similarly, as Laclau has it, we need to take into account a "heterogenous" element that escapes the logic of socio-economic formation: "Heterogeneity only enters the game if it can be shown that the very logic of totality – behind dialectical or semiological – fails at some point as a result of an aporia that cannot be resolved within that totality's structuring principle" (Laclau 2014, 162).

"Genuine Marxism, which is identified with rational political struggle for an egalitarian organization of society, doubtless began around 1848." (Badiou 2012, 8):

Marxism [...] is neither a branch of economics (theory of the relations of production), nor a branch of sociology (objective description of 'social reality'), nor a philosophy (a dialectical conceptualization of contradictions). It is, let us reiterate, the organized knowledge of the political means required to undo society and finally realize an egalitarian, rational figure of collective organization for which the name is 'communism'.

BADIOU 2012, 8

Independent from the question of whether Marxists need to be committed to egalitarianism, with this extreme view of Marxism as "movement of history," the entire theoretical side of Marxist theorizing falls apart and becomes a secondary aspect in Badiou's Manichean worldview. This radical political definition of Marxism remains, however, dissatisfactory, which is especially visible in Badiou's reduction of capital, capitalism, and other categories of society to empirical data about which one needs to be "informed" (Badiou 2008, 8), but since the data are well known, about which we do not need theory, dialectics or conceptual clarity. In short, society for Badiou has no reality and does not belong to the reality because in all of its aspects society is the *effect* of politics, which brings about social organization. Society, in this vision, we might add, is *only* political organization. Consequently, Marxism must be taken as a movement that – independent from all socially determining factors – reorganizes the entire reality, or it is meaningless. Any theorizing about capitalism remains within the existing paradigm, as it only analyses what is taken to be untrue, whereas Marxism as a praxis (already) exists outside of the existing paradigm. The empirical data that Badiou deals with are, unsurprisingly, not very Marxian: according to Badiou, capitalism, for example, is a "regime of gangsters" (Badiou 2012, 12), driven by profit and greed, and characterized by privatization (Badiou 2012, 13). Capital is simply defined as a "nihilistic" principle through which the market expands globally, formalizes communication, and leads to us hegemony (Badiou 2005, 120). Capitalism, in other words, is here taken to refer to a set of "facts." These facts are as such not wrong, but, as I argue below, these facts as facts remain empty as long as they are not genetically reconstructed in their relation to social totality; otherwise society remains for philosophy as opaque as it appears to agents within the society.

Badiou's position, in an odd reversal, shows some similarities with Chomsky's positivism for whom theory in social and political things is unnecessary,

insofar as social and political problems are self-transparent and accessible to everyone. This entirely anti-Marxian position should be rejected from the viewpoint of a critical theory of society. As Adorno nicely puts it: "theories and sentences focus on society, insofar as these cannot be found in the Baedeker" (Adorno 2008, 39).³ The current social formation, according to Badiou, need not be thought of as a different social organization of labor and society; rather, it purely reorganizes itself in political terms, which is based on the "force of an idea" (Badiou 2012, 15), of communism. This idea constitutes and interpellates individuals as political subjects that project the egalitarian idea into a non-existing history and thereby militantly reorganizes the reality (Badiou 2010, 3–5). Indeed, according to Badiou, the political subject is "a militant of this truth" (Badiou 2010, 3) through the "incorporation" of the idea. The individual goes through a process of "subjectivation" (Badiou 2010, 3): "The communist idea is what constitutes the becoming-political Subject of the individual as also and at the same time his or her projection into history" (Badiou 2010, 4). According to Badiou's idealism, through this political baptism and renewal of isolated and "animalistic" bodies these bodies now belong to a new order:

Without the idea, the only thing left is an animalized humanity. Capitalism is the animalization of the human beast, who no longer lives except in terms of its interests and what it deems to be its due. This animalization is extremely dangerous because it is devoid of values and laws.

BADIOU 2010b, 35

This reduction of capitalism to an anthropological unit, to an apocalyptic nihilist system, and to a life without idea, reminds us of a mix of Christian theology and Heideggerian metaphysics. Capitalism is a system characterized by a spiritual downfall and meaningless life, which only *the* idea can bring back. Here Communism becomes an empty placeholder for the good. Instead of soldiers of the hidden church, we now have our communist soldiers who liberate us from the downfall of civilization.

Badiou's attempt to present a militant politics beyond capital positions him also in opposition to Negri. As Badiou argues, the question of the political is not a question about classes, movements and other agents; rather, as he argues against Negri, it is a question of how to organize a mass under the heading of an idea. The anti-globalization movement, for example, is rejected as operating within the system. Instead, Badiou promotes "an autonomy and heterogeneity of politics, which exists at a remove from any relational dialectic" (Toscano

3 The "Baedeker" is a famous German travel and cultural guide.

in Bidet/Kouvelakis 2009, 532). Badiou's thesis that the form of politics in the form of (a) party has been exhausted and his rejection of Negri's attempt to think the political subject as the movement of the multitude, in combination with his rejection of social-economic categories and social reality, leads him to an empty militant subject who is constituted by an abstract idea that, as such, can contain anything. Nothing exists between the universal truth and the singular individual in Badiou's schema. Put differently, in his schema between the "two" (love) and the "all" (politics), nothing exists that is *constitutive* for reality. The image of a *philosophical soldier* might be of interest for activists that have lost their party and hope, but it is, as I submit, insufficient for developing a critical theory, as Marx already warned: "Do not say that social movement excludes political movement. There is never a political movement which is not at the same time social" (MEW 4, 182).

Though in their political positions they disagree, other post-Marxists, such as Ranciere and Laclau, operate in close proximity to Badiou. In recent publications Ranciere has recovered a radical anarchist notion of democracy as the "ungoverning" element in all government and as an event that underlies *all* attempts to organize social reality politically. According to Ranciere, democracy is the ultimate source of all social organization, insofar as all political reorganizations of society need to control the very uncontrollable element that sets any political control and organization in motion. Society, as it were, becomes "bracketed" by events of democracy, as the latter is the very word for the fundamental instability of the entire social order. Politics, as in Badiou, here turns into the *ontological* ground of the social, and, since it remains *external* to this order, it is also a deconstructivist "reminder" that cannot be described in social terms. This move leads, as in Badiou, to an uncanny return to historically universal concepts, which is nicely visible in the following statement: "The power of the people is not that of a people gathered together, of the majority, or of the working class. It is simply the power peculiar to those who have no more entitlements to govern than to submit" (Ranciere 2006, 46). Ranciere offers even the most radical formulation of the "autonomy" theorists by claiming that the political in the form of radical democracy does not depend on *any* social, ethical and historical forms:

Democracy is as bare in its relation to the power of wealth as it is to the power of kinship that today comes to assist and to rival it. It is not based on any nature of things nor guaranteed by any institutional form. It is not borne along by any historical necessity and does not bear any. It is only entrusted to the constancy of its specific acts.

RANCIERE 2006, 97

The problem with this position is not that it reintroduces a strong concept of politics; rather, the problem with this vision is, as in Badiou, that it is unable to conceptualize the political agent as a *historically specific* and social-economic agent who, as I argue below, can only be a political agent because its being is social. In Ranciere's schema, although he does not go as far as Negri's multitude, the political agent is "people." These "people," however, remain as empty as Badiou's subject; for "people" is a substance without form. If Ranciere's thesis would be true, then we should be able to apply this concept of democracy and politics to all forms of society, including nomadic societies, indigenous societies, or ethnically and religiously divided societies, which does not make sense, unless, as Ranciere *presupposes*, there is a (modern) social-historical form under which his concepts are intelligible. Accordingly, the real battle that we are currently fighting is based on the problem of whether we want to remain faithful to Marx's later position and its standpoint of reproduction, or whether we indeed want to return to a metaphysically or anthropologically based autonomy of the political. The frontline of this battle was already nicely summarized by Poulantzas in an interview given in 1970:

One must know whether one remains within a Marxist framework or not; and if one does one accepts the determinant role of the economic in the very complex sense; not the determination of forces of production but of relations of production and the social division of labour. [...] The conceptual framework of Marxism has to do with this very annoying thing which is called 'relations of production' and the determinant role of relations of production. If we abandon it then, of course, we can speak of the autonomy of politics or of other types of relations between politics and economy.

POULANTZAS 2008, 396

In other words, almost all contemporary political left philosophers ranging from anarchists like Ranciere to Maoists like Badiou, reject the primacy of the relations of production, which, going back to Marx's position in *The German Ideology*, is based on what Althusser calls the "standpoint of reproduction" (Althusser 2008, 1-8). Instead of the *reproduction* of life, these political philosophers argue that there is a principle located before the reproduction of life. The problem, then, is to construct a concept of society that remains "authentic" to its root, and to the creativity and self-determination of life or the people, which, on a side note, brings back central problems of Marx's early humanism. This problem is most visible in Negri's speculations about constituent power, as he, similar to Abensour, claims that constituent power

is ultimately an ontological principle of life itself. "As a form of dystopia," Negri claims, "constituent power shows a singular and irreducible concept of the political, but at the same time it construes and connects a methodology, a philosophy of history, and an ethics that are equally singular" (Negri 1999, 320). As a consequence, ontological speculations a la Negri about the multitude and its intrinsic capacities, such as desire, love, and enjoyment, conceived as the *ontological* foundation of reality, make the social a secondary principle, and it is precisely this thesis that is in conflict with the standpoint of reproduction. To be fair, though, Negri is somewhere in the middle in this picture, as he tries to argue that constituent power understood as the "strength" of the multitude finds its echo in the social through living labor: "Living labor constitutes the world, by creatively modeling, *ex novo*, the materials that it touches" (Negri 1999, 326). Whether Negri's attempt to move between the two camps is successful remains an open question, especially since he tends to underplay, on the one hand, the historical aspect of social reproduction (which, if taken seriously, would not allow us to move directly from life to labor), and, on the other hand, the role of capitalist relations of production and state apparatuses that lead, as Poulantzas has argued, to a distribution of bodies *before* they can express themselves in labor (Poulantzas 2006, 28–30). Accordingly, it is highly questionable whether we can simply start with an abstract conception of life that expresses itself *immediately* in labor, especially since this leads to an a-historical view of society. As Zizek points out, expressed in traditional philosophical dualities, a strong defense of the autonomy of the political implies a return to "idealism" (Zizek 2002, 272). Instead, I propose against all these left neo-idealisms, that we assume that labor always has a social form, i.e., a mode that depends upon the presupposed organic whole of social relations expressed in social categories. In our case this is capital. Here I am in agreement with Zizek, who underlined that it is precisely the lack of a rigorous analysis of the socio-economic sphere that gets lost in their Deleuzian redescription of life and politics (for this, see Zizek 2002, 331). This critique can be expanded to virtually all contemporary political philosophers, as almost all of them overlook Marx's analysis of capitalism. As Zizek has it:

The problem with the deconstructionist or Deleuzian poetry of capital is that it totally suspends Marx's intention to provide an actual economic analysis of existing capitalism, not simply a critical philosophy of commodity fetishism and reification.

IBID., 279

This lack is also visible in Laclau's semiotic and Derrida inspired political philosophy. As Toscano has argued with Zizek, Badiou's metaphysics shows a "family resemblance" with Laclau's thought (Toscano in Bidel/Kouvelakis 2009, 530). Similar to Ranciere, though with an eye to the plurality of antagonisms in our contemporary social order, Laclau also assumes "that there is a heterogeneous 'outside' preventing political economy from closing itself around its internal categories, and thus constituting the *fundamentum inconcussum* of the social." (Laclau 2014, 153). Laclau argues that all contemporary social antagonisms and struggles in their plural variety cannot be reduced to a single and unified struggle against capital; rather, as he puts forward, the unification of these struggles can only come out of these struggles, but in their diversity they remain outside of a unified social-economic framework that Marxist theory tries to place as the meta-framework above all other factors that determine social agents: "forces opposing capitalism are not just the result of a capitalist logic, but *interrupt* it from the outside, so that the story of capitalism cannot result from the unfolding of its internal categories" (Laclau 2014, 154). Though not as militant as Badiou, for Laclau the political is no longer a dialectical category that can be grasped through the existing relations of production; rather, the political is in principle *external* to the entire social order, and only because it is external to it, is it possible, As Laclau argues, the political can break through the existing orders: "the antagonism presuppose a radical outside, there is no reason to think that locations within the relations of production are going to be privileged points of their emergence" (Laclau 2014, 166). Given the primacy of the political, which leads to a pluriverse of social "formulations," society in the abstract becomes something absolutely contingent: "For me, the 'political' has a primary structuring role because social relations are ultimately contingent, and any prevailing articulation results from an antagonistic confrontation whose outcome is not decided beforehand" (Laclau 2014, 160). Consequently, he argues that a position that operates with the primacy of the economic, even in a wider and complex sense, presupposes "that at no point does social reality overflow what that matrix can determine and control" (Laclau 2014, 161), the consequence of which is giving up on the concept of class. It becomes clear that Laclau's concept of a theory of society is extremely reductive, insofar as he lays out Marxist theory from the beginning on as a *political* theory with a focus on class and revolution, which leads him to reject the concept of society itself. Society, however, is the condition for the possibility of making any social distinctions, such as class or antagonism. As I will argue below, there is a difference between social relations, institutions, or group-related dynamics and the *form* under which all of these relations can be

thought of as belonging to *society* and, as such, as being than more than the sum of all empirical relationships.

The Primacy of Ethics: Honneth

Let me briefly discuss another shift that we can currently observe in post-Marxist thought, namely, the shift towards a normative or ethical foundation of society. In contradistinction to philosophers discussed in the last section, recent critical theorists in the Frankfurt School tradition have argued for a turn towards communication, as well as towards recognitional and normative considerations in critical theory. This turn is posited in particular against Adorno, since Adorno still maintains that we need to develop a concept of society that is a totality and based on a principle of synthesis, which, for Adorno, is exchange. As he puts it in his *Introduction to Sociology* (1968):

What really makes society a social entity, what constitutes it both conceptually and in reality, is the relationship of exchange, which binds together virtually all the people participating in this kind of society. [...] Ladies and Gentlemen, the abstraction we are concerned with is not one that first came into being in the head of a sociological theoretician who then offered the somewhat flimsy definition of society which states that everything relates to everything else. The abstraction in question here is really the specific form of the exchange process itself; the underlying social fact through which socialization first comes about. If you want to exchange two objects and – as is implied by the concept of exchange – if you want coexchange them in terms of equivalents, and if neither party is to receive more than the other, then the parties must leave aside a certain aspect of the commodities. In discussing equal exchange, I must for the moment disregard the question whether a violation of equivalence is not implied in the concept of exchange itself; for the present we are concerned only with constructing the concept to the extent that it is constitutive of society. In developed societies the exchange takes place, as you all know, through money as the equivalent form.⁴

ADORNO 2003, 58

4 Though I agree with Adorno in principle, I have criticized his position by arguing that he does not go far enough insofar as he traces exchange back to money and labor (for this, see Lotz 2013 and Lotz 2014a).

The recent turn away from Adorno implies (even if not always admitted) a fundamental *ontological* assumption, namely the assumption, that “normativity” or ethics is the true foundation of the social, a thesis that we also find in philosophers such as Levinas. In Honneth’s philosophy the turn is most visible in his return to a Hegelian inspired theory of democratic ethics [*Sittlichkeit*] which is driven by a set of recognitional relations that structure all aspects of society normatively (Honneth 2011). Similar to Habermas, Honneth leaves the “production paradigm” (Habermas) behind in order to replace it by a model of social recognition. Recognitional relations and processes are thereby understood as relations that are determined by ethical background assumptions, claims about these assumptions, and their social-psychological consequences. Rather surprisingly, Honneth has paid more attention to economic issues in recent years (Honneth 2011) and, in a contribution to a large conference on Marx in Berlin 2011, he criticized the Marxian Critique of Political Economy on the grounds of his theory. Honneth’s attack is, mildly put, wrongheaded, insofar as he claims that Marx reduces social agents to utilitarian agents that only function in accordance with “economically functional imperatives” (Honneth 2013, 350) and within their self-interests. This starting point is a non-starter, however, because Marx is not terribly interested in utilitarian market agents; rather, his theory is *about the social form, under which the talk of self-interested market participants makes sense*. In addition, as Honneth argues, must we not confuse social conflicts with conflicts that are the result of the logic of capital. According to Honneth, Marx did not understand that historical, political, and normative conflicts cannot be reduced to conflicts that emerge out of a narrowly defined social principle, such as capital.

Honneth varies an age old critique advanced against Marx, namely, that Marx reduces social agents to economically determined agents unable to understand normative conflicts and the complexity of modern social life. Moreover, Honneth claims, the “temporal schema of a non-stoppable and uninterrupted expansion of capitalist valorization interests” (Honneth 2013, 356) does not help us understand that social progress as a *normative* process of social agents who fight for their interpersonal and for social recognition on the bases of claims that presuppose equally applicable normative assumptions. Put differently, according to Honneth, classical critical theory does not understand the advancements of capitalist society. As we know, though, Marx celebrates the civilizing achievements of capitalism, but – and this is the difference – he does not lay this out in terms of justice and norms, which, according to recent Frankfurt School philosophers, is its defect. Agents, such as classes, accordingly, already presuppose an ethically-defined framework under which social conflicts can appear as normatively defined exchanges. But we are unable

to grasp this dynamic with Marx's Critique of Political Economy, so the story goes, and as such, we are asked to start with the assumption that social relations are founded on the basis of social-ethical assumptions, instead of asking first whether this basis is made possible by the concept and analysis of capital. It is precisely this claim that brings Honneth close to other post-Marxist philosophers, insofar as he proposes a shift in social ontology. Honneth's formulation of a "reality constituting ethics" [*wirklichkeitsbildender Moral*] (Honneth 2013, 358) should not be underestimated, inasmuch as the social reality here is founded upon something that remains external and foreign to the social as such, namely, in this case the ethical framework. Though Frankfurt School thinkers like to talk about our post-metaphysical age, they cannot avoid making certain tacit assumptions that reveal their commitments in regard to the being and reality of the social. In Honneth's case it is without doubt the idea that that which traditional critical theory had called "the" society is in truth Hegelian *Sittlichkeit*, of which civil society only partakes and parasitically feeds upon. It is of no surprise, then, that Honneth tends to downplay theories that operate with concepts and categories, and, instead, foregrounds intersubjective relations between agents. The thesis that all social relations are ultimately constituted by ethics is identical with the claim that the actuality of all entities that can be addressed as "social" already fall under the form "ethics." According to Honneth, this is also true for capital itself: The "capital relation," as he puts it, is "shot through" with normativity (Honneth 2013, 359). The consequences of this theoretical shift are obvious: instead of analyzing social reality as the result of a collective productivity that appears under a specific social form (=value), Honneth returns to idealist principles, insofar as he no longer assumes that the social reality is unified under such a form. Instead, he needs to argue that the normative frame that underlies social relations, including capitalist market relations, are based upon a *universally* defined ethics and morality. With this, however, we lose *precisely* the Marxian basis for analyzing society as a unity that frames everything that falls under it. The historically specific character of capitalism, we might say, is no longer visible in Honneth's ethicism because he needs to found a historically specific form on *universal* assumptions that, as such, remain historically neutral. The basic problem with our post-Marxist contemporaries becomes visible at this point: instead of taking human productivity as the central concept for a critical theory of society, Honneth takes *moral claims* to be the central concept, which, consequently, leads to a rejection of a substantial concept of money, capital, value and class, as class conflicts are now replaced by a pluriverse of social conflicts that are *all* based on "normative conflictuality" (Honneth 2013, 361). With this, the genesis of social relations from their origin in value, capital, and labor gets lost and

social totality disappears behind a postmodern veil of a myriad of discourses, claims, arguments, and normative exchanges.

Even empirically Honneth's position leads to odd and at times cynical consequences: social pathologies are mainly interpreted as psychological, i.e. subjective, phenomena. However, being faced with the fact that 98% of the world's population is excluded from the wealth of the other 2%, Honneth's claim that market agents are equally determined by a "prior consciousness of solidarity" (Honneth 2011, 329) and the recognition of a shared value system (Honneth 2011, 341) remains ideological, to say the least. Given the fact that the three richest individuals on our planet control as much wealth as 600 million individuals at the bottom, Honneth's claim that *all* "economic agents need to recognize themselves as members of a cooperative community" (Honneth 2011, 349) is nonsense, as it is precisely the other way around. As Marx argues in the *Grundrisse*, the monetization of all social relations leads to the externalization of society, which today is mostly visible in the fact that people who profit most from collective productivity take themselves to be totally disconnected from society. The assumption of a quasi-transcendental morality that regulates all economic exchanges misses the fact that such an ethics would need a different social-economic form of society. Honneth's odd claim that with the "market-mediated division of labor social relations emerge in which all members of society can develop an 'organic solidarity' because they reciprocally recognize themselves in their contributions to their shared wealth" (Honneth 2010, 97) sounds nice, and Hegel would have clapped, but ideologically it simply repeats and affirms the widespread "social violence" (Adorno 1998/8, 383) that we find in our contemporary global order. As Marx has it in his arguments against this Hegelian position:

what is forgotten, finally, is that already the simple forms of exchange value and money latently contain the opposition [and inequality, C.L.] between labour and capital. Thus, what all this wisdom comes down to is the attempt to stick fast at the simplest economic relations, which, conceived independently, are pure abstractions; but these relations are, in reality, mediated by the deepest antagonisms, and represent only one side, in which the full expression of the antagonisms is obscured.

MEW 42, 173

Be that as it may, in my view the shift away from a social ontology founded upon human productivity towards the political or the ethical leads to paradoxes, given that with the foundation of the social upon something that remains external to sociality the task of a (critical) theory becomes impossible, inasmuch

find a plurality of different social forms and "antagonistic points are going to be multiple" (Laclau 2014, 167) and remain heterogeneous to each other, or its proponents argue that only certain aspects of capitalism can be changed, but not its "good and just" framework. The loss of finitude as a *social* concept as underlying political finitude in post-Marxist thought is finally also visible in the loss of a Marxian concept of critique. Let me therefore finish my critique of post-Marxist thought with a brief analysis of what is meant by "critique" in a Marxian theoretical horizon.

The Marxian Concept of Critique

German and Anglo-American Frankfurt School theorists since Habermas have repeatedly argued against older authors within the same tradition that the concept of critique needs to be backed up by normative concepts. In addition, as Habermas argued, social reality cannot be derived from the "production paradigm," as the latter is in need of normativity. Instead, as is well known, he introduced a communicative paradigm, which Honneth further expanded into a recognitional paradigm. As I will argue in this section, the argument that critical theory is necessarily in need of normative foundation is wrongheaded, as the concept of critique should be conceived of as the attempt to reveal the *inner limits* of its object through an analysis of what is essential to its object. As the object of social critique is society, a critical theory of society is or becomes critical whenever it reveals its object as *limited*. Only if we understand that the object of critical theory is *finite* and historically limited, can we understand that the concept of totality is a *critical concept* and has nothing to do with what philosophers from Lyotard to Laclau conceive as "totalizing."

The concept of "immanent critique" has often been discussed in the secondary literature on Marx. It seems to me, however, that one important aspect has often been overlooked, namely, the Kantian origin of the concept of critique that Marx combines with a genetic theory of social relations. In a central passage on Hegel, Marx writes:

[T]rue philosophical criticism of the present state constitution not only shows the contradictions as existing, but explains them, grasps their genesis; its necessity. It comprehends their peculiar and characteristic significance. However, this comprehension does not, as Hegel thinks, consist in everywhere finding the determinations of the logical concept, but rather in grasping the peculiar logic of the specific object.

MEW1, 296; transl. altered

as post-Marxist theories reject the idea that social phenomena can be traced back to their underlying social form and that it is the task of theory to make the genesis of social categories transparent. Social transparency, however, can only be reached if we assume that all social categories ultimately go back to and take part in a unified social form. This task, however, can only be achieved if these social categories can be brought together in a *coherent* unity so that social totality as a historically specific form becomes apparent. As I will argue in the following: only the assumption of society as a social totality can lead to an understanding of capitalism as a *finite* social form. This systematic character of what we call "capitalism" as a *form* gets lost in economic, sociological, and positivist accounts of capitalism. In Marx's own words (that he removed after the first edition of *Capital*),

The value-form of the product of labor is the most abstract but also most general form of the bourgeois mode of production, which hereby is characterized as a specific type of social mode of production and thereby likewise historical. Therefore, if one misperceives it for the eternal natural form of social production, one, then, naturally also overlooks what is specific in the value-form, thus the commodity-form, and, further developed, the money-form, the capital-form, etc.

MEGA II/5, 44; translation from MURRAY 2013

This finite form is based on valorized labor and, accordingly, I reject Laclau's claim that "there is no ultimate *substratum*, no *nature* (*sic*) *naturans*, out of which existing social articulations could be explained" (Laclau 2014, 169). To repeat this simple point, it is clear that all politics, all ethics, and everything else human would disappear if we would stop being productive and would stop laboring; life is primary, and it cannot be grasped without the production of needs, its cooperative element, and its relation to the earth. The organization of these relations into an existing whole, a form, is necessary for the reproduction of this whole. *Society does exist*, but it does not exist in the universal. Since production as such cannot exist, society as such cannot exist either. This finitude gets lost in post-Marxist thought: in Badiou we are forced to wait for some incalculable and unforeseeable event (which, since it cannot explain the finitude of capitalism from the inside, *in principle* expands the existing system towards an infinite future) and in Honneth we are forced to assume that capitalism is based on a universal normativity that escapes any finitude. As a consequence, only internal advancements are possible. We always end up with a conception of society that remains capitalist in its essence, i.e., its proponents either argue that capitalism does not exist because we only

Decisive in this quote are three aspects of Marx's concept of critique, namely: [1] critique is a procedure that leads to a comprehension of its object, [2] critique is essentially a genetic procedure, and [3], critique comprehends the *inner logic* of its object, and in this way, as we will see, it grasps its essence. We can easily see that here critique is introduced by Marx as an analytic activity that attempts to define its object through grasping the *inner limits* of its object by tracing its elements back to their origins. Genesis is here identical with *finitude*, insofar as an object with its genesis can no longer be located in an abstract logical space that is characterized by an atemporal structure. Instead, a genetically determined object has a temporally limited horizon and therefore a finite (and historical) origin. Only an object that can be determined by its own inner logic can be *separated* from another object, as the difference between objects comes about through that which "makes them up" as precisely this and not another object. A determination of an object in its being, accordingly, introduces a limit through which the particularity of the object is revealed. Marx's connection of critique and analysis has a phenomenological character, as he traces that which makes an object a particular object back to its inner categorical determinations. As we know, this idea is central for Kant's *First Critique* in which Kant criticizes existing metaphysics not only by *limiting* the scope of what could legitimately fall under metaphysics, but also by *limiting* the scope and essence of reason and rationality itself. The concept of critique, as Kant knew, goes back historically, on the one hand, to "making a selection," and, on the other hand, to "judgment." "Judgment" originally means to "say that something is such and such," and, accordingly, it has a positive sense. Moreover, Heidegger reminded us that *categoryen* literally means to say *what something is*. So, a successful judgment is a judgment that reveals the scope and limits of the object of the judgment.

Accordingly, it should become more transparent how Marx uses the concept of critique for the analysis of capitalism. The *Critique of Political Economy* is critical because the Marxian critique does not deal with *any* social formation; instead, it has a *specific* object, which is capitalist society (i.e., a social formation determined by valorized labor). A critique of capitalist society, consequently, tries to analyze this specific sociality as a specific *form*, and, hence, tries to analyze capitalism in such a way that its *inner limits* become visible by revealing its essential categorical determinations. As we said above, determining a social formation in its inner logic and inner limits is identical with revealing it as a historically finite social formation. From this it follows immediately that the specific categories that belong to the object of critical analysis [a] must be related to each other through their inner genesis and coherence (i.e., they must be traced back to valorized labor) and [b] must be analyzed

in their historical genesis by revealing their historical origin. That is why dialectics means both method and history. This is nicely visible in a distinction that Marx makes at the beginning of the chapter on "original accumulation." There he draws a distinction between two concepts of origin and argues against political economists of his time that they identify origin [*Ursprung*] with past [*Vergangenheit*]. Whereas bourgeois political economists determine the "origin" of economic development as something that remains *external* to the economic development itself, i.e., as a thing of the past that is over and no longer is part of the development itself, Marx's own analysis reveals the origin of the economic development as a *moment* of this development. The origin, in the Marxian sense, accordingly, is a genetic concept, insofar as the origin is a category of the *inner* structure and logic of the object in question. One could also say that the origin of capitalism is not like a cause that brought capitalism about, which would presuppose two separate entities (cause and effect); rather, the origin of capitalism is an essential moment of this form of sociality itself. As Lukács has argued, the main category for Marx is "interaction" [*Wechselwirkung*]. Consequently, in every one of its stages the development of capitalism depends on this original element. For example, the violence contained in the original accumulation of capital is not something that can be left behind with the further development of capitalism (as some of its contemporary proponents would claim); instead, we need to grasp the (specific) violence of capitalism as an inner and intrinsic moment of this (specific) social formation itself. The chapter on primitive accumulation, accordingly, does not deal with something that belongs to the past; rather, it deals with the past as something contemporaneous. As a consequence of the foregoing, we need to claim that within the Marxian framework it is not only the case that "production as such" cannot exist, but also, that "society as such" does not exist, insofar as critical theory deals with a specific social formation that is not taken to be universal (though it is based on a universal). As there is no universal economic science, there is no universal social science.

Critique of Political Economy is critical because it reveals its object, capitalist society, as a *finite* form of sociality that, because it is finite, can also be overcome, can fall apart, or can be replaced by a different form of sociality. This consideration already contains a concept of totality that is in itself and as such critical; for the analysis of the essence of capitalist sociality necessarily presupposes a unity of its object and, since it is a specific unity, a negative concept of this unity. The origin of Marx's concept of contradiction is to be found in its concept of totality, as this very totality can only exist in its unity because it is limited *through itself*. The essence of an object is not this specific essence because it is not another essence; rather, as Marx says in the quote above, as a

social phenomenologist, it is *this* essence because it contains *its own* peculiar logic. Consequently, we need to assume that the negativity of the unity of this essence is an *internal negativity* (for this see Adorno 2008, 47). In this sense, all critical theory is based on what Adorno called “negative dialectics.” In sum, Marx’s concept of critique, as I just outlined it, is nicely visible in a famous quote from a letter to Lassalle written in February 1858:

The work I am presently concerned with is a *Critique of Economic Categories* or, if you like, the system of the bourgeois economy critically presented. It is at once a presentation of the system and because of the presentation a critique of the system.

MEW 29, 550

Conclusion

We can conclude from the foregoing the reasons for why the “theme of detotalization” (Toscano in Bidet/Kouvelakis 2009, 562) and the “suspicion towards the very idea of a totality of social relations” (Toscano in Bidet/Kouvelakis 2009, 563) that we find in post-Marxist thought goes into the wrong direction, as it is *precisely* the concept of totality that leads to a *detotalization* of history, to an anti-teleological concept of history, and to the possibility of rupture based on the negativity of the capitalist totality, which leads to a fundamental *fruitude* of this specific social organization. In sum, the political, as Badiou, Ranciere, Laclau, and Mouffe claim, *cannot* be the first principle of social totality because it disconnects the social agent from the achieved historical level of social reproduction. The return to the political and, perhaps, the return to an *abstract* and empty form of Leninism in contemporary radical philosophy is based on the disconnection of philosophical speculation about the root of social reality *from* this reality, insofar as post-Marxist thinkers tend to no longer look at the social reality as a dialectical relationship, i.e., as a mediated relation, which constitutes the social agent as an agent who is only able to *be* a social agent because she exists through and as a historically achieved level of social mediation and externalization. As Marx has it, the individual is *determinate* and, accordingly, the possibility of politics *must*, according to my counter-position, be determined and can only evolve out of social existence, now understood as social form. Every act, I contend, depends upon the externalized reality as its mediation and it can therefore not be thought of as a total break, as Badiou seems to assume. A historical break can only be successful if the *conditions for the political switch* are *present* in the situation of the break in both intellectual and imaginative

ways of how to go on and material ways of reorganization of the social relations of production. None of the post-Marxist philosophers says anything about how we *concretely* would move towards a different way of production, communication, and a reality not determined by capital. The latter presupposes the idea of a post-growth society, highly developed and highly creative individuals, as well as an associatively organized means of production. The idealist positions of our post-Marxists remain abstract and do not offer any concrete ways of a different productive life. Accordingly, their concepts of politics remain empty.

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CHAPTER 4

Capital's Reach: How Capital Shapes and Subsumes

Patrick Murray

Introduction

Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* begins: "Imagine that the natural sciences were to suffer the effects of a catastrophe" (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 1). MacIntyre is setting up his claim that modern moral discourse has suffered a catastrophe, though one that has gone largely unnoticed. My point of departure is that social theory (social philosophy and the social sciences) has undergone such a catastrophe – also largely unrecognized. Moreover, this catastrophe is being exacerbated by developments such as the usurpation of social theory by "economics imperialism." This catastrophe encompasses the fragmentation of modern moral discourse that MacIntyre bemoans. The social theory of the modern world that informs MacIntyre's historical account of the breakdown of moral discourse derives largely from Max Weber.¹ My account of the catastrophe of social theory derives from Karl Marx's critique of political economy.

Simon Clarke, in his book *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology*, states:

There was a scientific revolution in nineteenth-century social thought... It was inaugurated by Marx's critique of the ideological foundations of classical political economy, which he located in the political economists' neglect of the social form of capitalist production which was the basis of their naturalisation of capitalist social relations. For Marx society could not be explained abstractly, on the basis of the confrontation between abstract individuals and an abstract nature... Capitalist society is a society based on a particular social form of production, within which the production and reproduction of material things is subordinated to the production and accumulation of surplus value, and within which the participation of the individual in society is conditional on the individual's insertion into the social relations of production. Thus Marx's critique of political economy established an alternative foundation on

¹ "The contemporary vision of the world, so I have suggested, is pre-dominantly, although not perhaps always in detail, Weberian" (MacIntyre, 1984, 103).