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Christian Lotz

The Capitalist Schema: Time, Money, and the Culture of Abstraction

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Reviewed by **Frederick H Pitts**

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About the reviewer

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Review

The Capitalist Schema is a significant intervention into current reinterpretations of Marx's theory of value. Eschewing the Hegelian heritage of much value-form theory, Christian Lotz gives a Kantian interpretation of the law of value. This states that the money form works along schematic lines. Money, for Lotz, establishes the conditions of possible experience and the social thinghood of objects. The book gives the clearest exposition yet of the real abstraction by which all things enter into relation with all other things. In so doing, it surpasses earlier attempts to outline the schematic quality of the capitalist exchange relation. Lotz's is the most sophisticated and extensive development of the link between the law of value and the Kantian schematism yet given. Adopting critical distance from the early Frankfurt School, it represents a brilliant advancement of the theoretical project begun by Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1971).

Chapter One presents a social-material understanding of the Kantian schematism by way of Marx and Adorno. Chapters Two and Three outline the centrality of money as the arbiter of 'thinghood' necessary to access objects. Chapter Four examines the temporal dimensions of the schema, with past and future understood through the credit-debt nexus. Chapter Five argues that abstract culture issues from 'industries that take on the whole mental apparatus of capitalist individuals' (xxi). Thought, experience and reflection are not neutral external material moulded by the culture industry. Rather, the capacities themselves are produced by 'consciousness industries'.

Lotz situates his work in a Kantian philosophical tradition. Thus, 'everything we think and do is ... filtered through a schema'. This 'structures every reference and makes the relation between subject and object possible' (5). Where Lotz breaks with Kant's psychological explanation is in his social-materialist approach. This book is a response to two meetings with Kant on this terrain: Marx's critique of political economy and Adorno's critical theory.

Two moments, one each in the oeuvres of Marx and Adorno, are important for Lotz. First, Lotz tells us that the argument of *The Capitalist Schema* can be traced to a passage in the *Grundrisse*. Here, Marx contends that the money-form performs the same function as the rational schematism in Kant's idealist philosophy. This schematism 'makes it possible for a rational being to access and represent objects for the subject'. Through it, reason establishes 'a framework under which all objects ... make sense and can exist' (xvi).

Second, Lotz emphasises the importance of a 'side note' from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Here, Adorno and Horkheimer suggest that Hollywood and the culture industry are 'foreshadowed' by the Kantian schematism (2). Lotz critiques the conceptualisation of the culture industry as a psychological 'filtering' and 'prefiguring' of social meaning. He argues that it is an element of a 'social-material schema' that is itself capitalist, rather than prior to it.

Lotz's critique of Adorno centres upon his failure to complete the transformation of Kant's 'epistemological point of view into a critical point of view'. This is owing to the absence of a proper critique of political economy in his work (15). Lotz suggests that Adorno's analysis remains stuck at surface level. It treats exchange as the 'central concept of capitalism'. But for Lotz, exchange is

itself 'derive[d] from other social categories' (xiv). Solving this oversight with recourse to Marx, Lotz claims to advance on Adorno.

But one need not look far beyond the book itself to counter Lotz's claim that Adorno lacks a critique of political economy. After repeatedly asserting that Adorno has no political economy, in the final footnoted words of the book Lotz admits that Adorno does in fact 'seem to realize the role of political economy in his later writings and lectures' (157 n.1). Bonefeld (*ibid.*, n.19, 14) quotes Braunstein (2008), who argues that there is a 'genuinely Adornian version of critique of political economy'. This, we are told, is evidenced in unpublished, posthumously uncovered and documentary material. Braunstein's work is not cited by Lotz, and the implied obscurity of these sources may account for his having overlooked this side of Adorno's output. For instance, the 1962 seminar notes of Hans-Georg Backhaus (1997), uncited by Lotz, feature Adorno's consideration of 'socially necessary abstract labour time' (quoted in Bonefeld 2014, 127).

Lotz's critique goes deeper than finding and plugging gaps. Lotz labels Adorno a 'romantic' (23) guilty of 'use-value fetishism'. For Adorno, the development of exchange corrupts the enjoyment of use-values themselves. According to Lotz, this employs a historical view of the contradictory relationship between the two sides of the commodity. For Lotz, Marx's exposition of value is presentational, not chronological (20).

Rather than 'use-value fetishism', Adorno advocates a 'utopia of the qualitative'. He celebrates 'the things which through their difference and uniqueness cannot be absorbed into the prevalent exchange relationships' (2005, 120). It just so happens that this tends to be bound up in use-value in a capitalist society. But Adorno does not appeal to one side of the commodity over the other. He is against the abstraction from use. He is against the abstraction from difference, particularity and quality that commodification brings about. If this requires a historical frame of reference, as Lotz asserts Adorno is wont to use, whereby some kind of 'return' is envisioned, or a development desired undone, then this defies only the most logical and presentational understanding of Marx's theory. As Bonefeld has recently argued, Marx ends *Capital* with primitive accumulation because he works from present to past, akin to the understanding of the ape by means of the man. Only through adopting a historical standpoint can Adorno understand the possibility of escape: from quantity into quality, from homogeneity into heterogeneity, and from universality into particularity.

Indicative of Lotz's critique of Adorno is his assessment of the passage on child's play from *Minima Moralia*. In this passage, Adorno describes the 'purposeless activity' of pushing 'little trucks ... nowhere', with their 'tiny barrels' empty. In this activity, children side with 'use-value against exchange value'. They withdraw from the 'process of abstraction' constituted by the 'exchange relation'. They suggest that which is 'benign towards men' (2005, 228). But Lotz asserts that the distinction between use and exchange that Adorno employs is itself a 'result of capitalist reproduction'. He attributes this to Adorno's association of capitalism solely with the exchange principle (22).

In this regard, Lotz suggests that Adorno and Horkheimer overlook the industrial and productive dimensions of abstraction. Lotz suggests replacing 'culture industry' with 'consciousness industries'. His point is to show that the schema cannot be reduced to exchange (23-24). Lotz implies that Adorno and Horkheimer's account is too 'circulationist'. But the labour and production to which Lotz wishes to shift focus are inadequately theorised here. There seems no persuasive account of why we should not see the exchange principle as the ultimate source of the capitalist schema. Lotz emphasises the status of labour as the 'substance of social reality', whilst acknowledging its abstract form (35), but this is not fully explicated. The relationship between this substantialist approach to labour and Lotz's auspicious anti-substantialism is unclear.

For instance, Lotz takes a productivist position against the supposed circulationism of Adorno and Horkheimer's account of the culture industry. The 'technologies' undergirding the capitalist schema are 'abstract units' that 'exist in the means of production'. This relates to the claim that labour is the reproductive 'hinge' of the capitalist schema. These productive technologies produce the individuals for which the 'frame' applies (7). For Lotz, it is 'consciousness industries' that produce the very human material upon which the schema works. They differ from Adorno and Horkheimer's 'culture industry', which the latter suggest produces the schema itself.

But 'production' here is ill-defined. How can we see it apart from the framework of the schema? As Lotz himself cites Marx as having suggested, 'to speak of production "as such" is an empty abstraction' (154). The production that takes place in Lotz's 'consciousness industries' involves labour as a 'hinge' that reproduces the frame. But we cannot speak of labour as productive except by means of the exchange abstraction. The understanding of what is productive, then, arises through the capitalist schema. It would be impossible to speak of something being productive without it having value. Value is subject to its exchangeability in the social realm rather than anything resting in the sphere of production. As such, the category of 'production' (or 'productiveness') cannot pre-exist the exchange principle. On this reading, the capitalist schema must rest in exchange.

Lotz pays lip-service to labour where it is not necessary to do so. How can we know that labour is 'the true substance of society and wealth', except through the framework of the capitalist schema? How else than through the potential or actual conferral of monetary value? To be consistent with Lotz's own theory, we should say that labour has no independent significance outside its abstract monetary appearance. Despite the status of labour as the 'hinge' upon which the reproduction of the schema depends, for

Lotz the capitalist schema moves through money (22). This compromises his ability to talk about labour and production as alternative poles of explanation against exchange.

Lotz suggests that, if the schema orders reality according to potential monetary value, then it is impossible to redeem anything in the way Adorno suggests. But Adorno's appeal to the utopia of the qualitative need not fall on these grounds. Everything is potentially exchangeable and monetary. Everything is just as easily potentially otherwise. Lotz examines the claims of those who would suggest that there are things that fall outside or are unassimilable within commodity exchange. This includes 'forms of exchange that are not based on commodities'. He cites Kojin Karatani's position that the family is one such 'pre-commercial' or 'non-commercial' form. Against this, Lotz states that value is not a thing, but sociality itself. It is a potentiality for anything that meaningfully 'exists'. This potential differentiates love and family in capitalist society from love and family in a non-capitalist society. Maintaining and reproducing the family in capitalist society proceeds through the money-form. The family is 'unthinkable' outside the money-form and the nexus of social relationships that it implies (41).

But 'unthinkability' for Lotz relates to the ever-present potentiality that things can take a monetary form. This potentiality need not be realised for things to be accessible and granted objecthood. All that matters is that the potentiality exists. On this basis, potentiality works both ways. It can be potentially this or potentially that. This is the key principle of a dialectic approach. Adorno's passage on the family in *Minima Moralia* suggests what is at stake. Adorno writes that 'it sometimes seems as if the fatal germ-cell of society, the family, were at the same time the nurturing germ-cell of uncompromising pursuit of another'. It is both an 'agency of the bourgeoisie', and a potential mode of resistance and 'force of opposition' (2005, 22-3). Something understood on its potential to be one thing is just as well understood on its potential to be another.

Adorno sees a challenge to the rule of capital, the logic of abstraction, the commodified world, by means of family and fidelity. 'The fidelity exacted by society is a means to unfreedom,' Adorno writes, but 'only through fidelity can freedom achieve insubordination to society's command' (2005, 172). How striking, then, that we should find an uncanny resonance between this position and a passage in Lotz's book. Lotz himself repeats Adorno's 'romantic' attachment to the thing itself in the context of love. 'The person who is passionately in love with something or someone and devotes all of his or her libido towards one object', he writes, 'is the real enemy of an industry that wants us to disperse all attention and redirect it towards valorization. Keeping attention means not only that one gives primacy to the object, but also that one can wait for what the object "will do"' (126).

Here Lotz departs from his downbeat assessment of the schematisation of human experience by the money-form. There is something redeemable in love that challenges rather than succumbs to the control of the consciousness industries. What is this if not the recognition that potentiality works both ways, and that Adorno's romantic utopianism projects a possible way out of the pessimistic scenario Lotz paints? Lotz's assessment of the role of money in determining our experiential access to reality invites no easy prescription for escape. Lotz's conceptualisation of potentiality invites uses unanticipated within his bleak outlook. Thinking dialectically, we can take small comforts from Adorno that Lotz is loath to offer.

26 February 2015

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Comments

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