

Bonefeld on Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy

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Werner Bonefeld. *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy: On Subversion and Negative Reason*. London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014. Pp. 244. \$120.00, hardback. ISBN: 9781441161390.

Werner Bonefeld's new book falls within the left German tradition of critical theory that originated from Adorno's students in the 1970s, including Hans-Joachim Krahl, Hans-Georg Backhaus and Helmut Reichelt. Now, their work is known as the "new Marx reading," to which younger authors such as Michael Heinrich, Frank Engster, Moishe Postone and Ingo Elbe contribute. In contrast to the "official" (post-) Habermasian version of critical theory, and despite all internal differences, this school reconnects critical theory to political economy and pushes critical theory back to its original impulses.¹ In addition, money and monetary considerations are central for the new Marx reading, which includes a rejection of Marxist theory as a primarily "economic" theory. In contradistinction to most scholars who are loosely connected to the new Marx reading, Bonefeld argues that critical theory as a critique of political economy can only be understood coherently if it keeps the concepts of class and class struggle at its center. Though money does not seem to be the key concept for Bonefeld, he

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1. Bonefeld's attempt to reestablish critical theory on Marxian grounds and his choice of central topics, such as time and real abstraction, shows an astonishing overlap with my own attempt to push critical theory back to a critique of political economy. For this, see Christian Lotz, *The Capitalist Schema: Time, Money, and the Culture of Abstraction* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

does follow the new Marx reading by arguing that critical theory is based on a critique of naturalized economic categories and a critique of a concept of labor “as a trans-historically conceived activity” (3). The consequence of this is that for Bonefeld critical theory is a critique of capitalist society as constituted by historically specific economic categories that find their central mechanism in its antagonistic character: “capitalist wealth manifests a definite conceptuality of labour” (41). Emphasizing both social form and class struggle, Bonefeld remains close to the later Adorno, particularly to his writings of the 1960s, when Adorno rediscovered Marxian-inspired theorizing and political economy.²

One of the central points in this new attempt to revise critical theory is the thesis that most economic theories are misguided, distorted or failed abstractions because they do not have a proper idea of what they are *about*, i.e., the object of their theories is unclear. As Bonefeld puts it, “economic science is haunted by its inability to define its subject matter” (25). This point, made early on by Backhaus, but also made by Althusser, shifts the entire Marxist theory onto a new level and overcomes what Bonefeld (with Heinrich) calls “worldview Marxism” (35). As a consequence, “political economy as a theory of the social constitution of economic categories” (21) tries to connect spheres that in standard theories are treated separately, such as economy, politics, the state, etc. Here, Bonefeld argues that critical theory reflects on economic categories as social categories and shows that ultimately they are one and the same. Accordingly, the object of economic theory that conceives of itself as a social theory, is social reality and not a separated “economy” that operates beyond, within, or above society. Critical theory, according to Bonefeld, is “a theory about the manner in which society organizes its reproduction” (21), i.e., about how society organizes its reproduction as a *whole*. Bonefeld’s formulation presents critical theory as a critique of political economy that is neither a theory of reproduction nor a theory of productive relations alone; rather, it is a theory of the *organization* of these relations. In this way, Bonefeld treats Marxist theory as a theory that denounces all naturalisms as ideology and that emphasizes social form and historical specificity.

This re-visioning of critical theory as political economy and its most important categories is presented in ten chapters within which the author first develops his concept of critical theory as a theory of social constitution.

2. For this, see the superb overview by Dirk Braunstein, *Adornos Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (Bielefeld: Transcript: Bielefeld, 2011); and Alex Demirovic, *Der nonkonformistische Intellektuelle. Die Entwicklung der Kritischen Theorie zur Frankfurter Schule* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1999). For a more speculative version of many of the concepts used in this text, see the impressive book by Frank Engster, *Das Geld als Mass, Mittel und Methode. Das Rechnen mit der Identität der Zeit* (Berlin: Neofelis Verlag, 2014).

He then proceeds, second, with reflections on class, class struggle, and the concept of abstract labor. In a third step, Bonefeld introduces wide ranging reflections on the state and the role of law in capitalist societies, before he ending his book with what he takes to be the primary ideology of the system, namely, anti-semitism. Although this idea may be surprising, Bonefeld follows here insights from Postone and Adorno/Horkheimer.

Though the author introduces his conception of critical theory well and situates his reflections nicely within the scholarship developed in the last three decades, the ten chapters remain only loosely connected. The reason for this may be a lack of philosophical reflection about how the categories that Bonefeld uses, such as abstract labor, abstract time, class, state, and world market, are linked to each other. This is a problem that has haunted most recent Marxian scholarship, which moves back and forth between a sociological take on social categories and a Hegelian attempt to deduce systematically the order and coherence of these categories. As a consequence, most chapters are new interpretations of key Marxian concepts, which are presented without reflections on why we need *these* and not other concepts. Nevertheless, Bonefeld's theoretical view is carefully worked out and his expositions are clear. Furthermore, though Bonefeld does not endorse a simple empiricist view of society, he does not follow the strong view that separates logic and history either. Instead, he argues that dialectics "articulates the real life-activity of the capitalist social forms as the definite social practice of 'active humanity'" (68), which leads him to endorse a kind of "hermeneutic" theory of the concepts that he uses as ways of "articulating" social relations. In order to understand the historically specific organization of social relations, Bonefeld introduces a concept of "conceptualization" with which he tries to navigate the pitfalls of positivism and metaphysics. As Bonefeld puts it, "in order to understand things, one has to be within them" (58), i.e., conceptualization, one might say, must be wrested from the phenomena, an idea that also guides Adorno's position in his *Negative Dialectics*. The goal, overall, is "deciphering the entire system of economic mystification as a socially constituted real abstraction" (39).

The author roughly follows Marx's six-book plan for *Capital*, which includes reflections on concepts that are less considered in recent Marxist scholarship, such as the state and the law (Poulantzas, Jessop, Hirsch, Holloway, Smith). The author's considerations are based on two points: first, he argues that the state has no autonomy and should be understood as a social configuration entirely: "the political world is the social world in political form" (166). Against Cox' theory of the world market, Bonefeld claims that "the state . . . is the political form of the capitalist social relations" (160). In every instance the state expresses capitalist social relations and functions as a super-agent who, "on the basis of the rule of law and by means of the force

of law making violence" (160), keeps the social antagonism in check.³ As a consequence, the state transforms "rebellious proletarians into self-responsible entrepreneurs of labor power" (175). Moreover, it depoliticizes social relations (176), and secures itself "as the presupposition of a depoliticized society" (180). Second, Bonefeld argues that the law functions as an instrument of violence and as a disciplining instrument: "the system of justice is dependent upon a moral code that commits individuals to the rules of justice, and therewith to the laws of private property" (170). In a Foucauldian move, Bonefeld pays much attention to the role of the police by reconstructing the contemporary relevance of Adam Smith's theory of the liberal state (170–74) and by showing that the capitalist state is constituted by the class antagonism and the protection of class based interest. In contrast to popular opinion, but following the general materialist theories of law and state, the author shows that the system of neoliberalism is not based on a weaker but a stronger state.

At times Bonefeld fails to keep his theoretical promise in these discussions, for example, by his tendency to fall back onto what Adorno would have called the danger of reified thought. Notions such as "the" state and "the" world market remain empty if they are treated as quasi-separate entities. This tendency to reify his main categories is visible in Bonefeld's lack of reflection on the *dynamics* and communicative dimension of political relations, such as international law, democratic rights, participatory struggles, and political discussions brought about by scale theorists. In the end, for Bonefeld, *every* modern political form is simply the backside of "the" capitalist social relations. He thereby falls back onto an insufficient view of capitalism that tends to overlook its contradictory tendencies. As the author states himself, capitalist totality is a negative totality (7) and, hence, we should also look at the political form of capitalist social relations as a contradictory unity. Consequently, if capitalism is indeed a negative totality we *must* find transcending views *within* existing political forms, i.e., within the existing state(s) and the law. Seen from Bonefeld's position, the difference between the political and the social are eliminated (as otherwise it could not be conceived as the political *form* of existing relations). This would lead, for example, to the highly doubtful view that there is virtually no difference between a contemporary totalitarian state and a neoliberal state since both are forms of "the" state. In particular, the *normative* and rational dimension of law is not mentioned once in the entire analysis and, as with other materialists who have dealt with the role of law in recent decades, Bonefeld seems to follow in the footsteps of legal positivism, if not legal nihilism, and

3. Unfortunately, Bonefeld does not take into account the superb book by Sonja Buckel, *Subjektivierung und Kohäsion. Zur Rekonstruktion einer materialistischen Theorie des Rechts* (Weilerswist: Vellbrueck 2007).

tends to reduce the rational core of the democratic *Rechtsstaat* simply to an oppressive instrument of the state. Although I agree with Bonefeld (and with Althusser and Foucault) that the law cannot be understood without its founding violence, its class based foundation, and its *physical* disciplining, the exclusion of *any* normative aspect and of *any* considerations of rationality and justice is philosophically insufficient. I do not think that we can simply treat *all* legal advances of the twentieth century as liberal (capitalist) ideology.

Following recent traditions and against classical and dogmatic readings of Marx, Bonefeld argues that commodity fetishism is not something external to the constitution of capitalist society, but instead is an objective feature of the social relations themselves. The turned-around structure, i.e., the topsy-turvy world, is a feature *of* this world: "The circumstance that definite social relations assume the form of a relationship between things, and thus subsist in and through a world of things, has nothing to do with the things themselves. It has to do with peculiar the character of the social relations that assume the form of things" (37).

Following Harvey and de Angelis, Bonefeld argues that the value form cannot be understood without accumulation by dispossession and primitive accumulation (80). It belongs to the "conceptuality of capital" (81), i.e., it is a necessary moment of capital and its historical reproduction: "primitive accumulation is a permanent accumulation" (85). Consequently, Bonefeld argues against the new Marx reading by claiming that the class relation cannot be eradicated from a proper analysis of capitalist social relations. Bonefeld (to my mind correctly) understands the class relation as a relation of violence (95). As a consequence, *contra* Postone, Bonefeld argues that class is an "objective category" of capitalist social reproduction, and should not be confused with the sociological conception of "social groups" (103). Bonefeld argues that we should reject the view that the class division is something that is constituted on the basis of an independent capitalist (neutral) framework (105), i.e., an implicit positivist account of a "neutral" society as something "given" or presupposed. According to Bonefeld, the class antagonism is constitutive of *all* capitalist social relations.

Although Bonefeld correctly rejects the idea that capitalist economic categories can be derived from an anthropological foundation (90), he smuggles an anthropological view in through the backdoor, by using a concept of authenticity. As he centrally puts it, "society is fundamentally Man in her social relations" (9). Social relations, however, are here understood as relations between persons (54), i.e., as intersubjective relations between individuals. Furthermore, sentences such as "man in her social relations exists in the 'mode of being denied'" (69), lead to the idea that a post-capitalist and communist society will simply dispense with its capitalist shell and return to a non-distorted "authentic" human world *without any* abstractions.

Bonefeld's strong dual thinking of either inauthentic abstractions or authentic concreteness seems to end up in the same problem as the early Marx, namely, operating with a concept of humanity in which humans would fully realize their human relationships once freed from the alienated world. One might ask, though, whether we would then live in a society in which social form and humanity collapse into one unity. It seems to me that this identity is based on a false concept of authenticity, since even a post-capitalist society must be based on a *specific* historical form. Otherwise, we fall back onto the abstraction that social relations can become one with "human" relations.

Finally, Bonefeld refuses to work with any vision of a better society: critical theory, he claims, is "entirely negative" (221). One wonders, however, whether the author artificially suppresses his ethical impulses of a *better* society, which even a messianic conception of critique cannot avoid, by claiming that critical theory "finds its positive resolution only in the classless society" (222). The Benjaminian undertone of Bonefeld's position leads him to reject *any* concept of history,⁴ although the assumption of a class struggle without conceiving it as a historical agent is difficult to imagine. For example, he calls the idea that history is a becoming of socialism, which he identifies as a Lukacsian idea, "absurd" (68). Of course, if we understand by "teleology" some kind of causal or rational *mechanism* in history, then we should reject this view (and Marx himself never held it). If, however, we follow Bonefeld and speak of a society in which we no longer are oppressed by the social abstractions that we reproduce in our lives, then we posit a goal that *could* be reached and for which class struggle stands. A classless society must be *posited as a real* possibility; otherwise, the entire conception does not make any sense, since speaking of a future that can be *realized* posits at least a minimal concept of history. Without at least acknowledging this minimal concept of history, every struggle for a non-capitalist future appears either as an illusion or as an *irrational* struggle without goal or telos.

In sum, despite my critical remarks, Bonefeld's book is a superb reflection on central aspects of a contemporary version of critical theory that no longer looks down upon political economy. It represents the very best of contemporary critical theory in the Anglophone world, and its author gives us a renewed vision of Marxist thought. Everyone who works on contemporary critical theory should consult Bonefeld's book as a light in a tunnel whose end is not in sight. — • —

4. "History does not lead anywhere; it has no telos, no objectives, no purposes and it does not take sides" (223).