

► Visit our partner site : [Marx & Philosophy Society](#)

Marx & Philosophy

REVIEW OF BOOKS



Support us

■ [Reviews](#) ■ [About](#) ■ [Submissions](#) ■ [Search](#) ■ [Contact](#)

Marx & Philosophy Review of Books » 2012 » Lotz: For a New Critique of Political Economy



Bernard Stiegler

For a New Critique of Political Economy

Polity, Cambridge and Malden MA, 2010. 100pp., £12.99 pb

ISBN 9780745648040

Reviewed by **Christian Lotz**

Bernard Stiegler has become a rising star in some circles of “Continental Philosophy” in the US and in Europe, especially since more translations of his work have appeared during the last decade. Having (so far) published more than 25 books, Stiegler does not seem to run out of ideas and energy, and thus he has emerged as one of the French philosophers “to come.” His book *For a New Critique of Political Economy* brings together critical analyses of contemporary tendencies in capitalism and was written in the aftermath of the instability of the financial system. Stiegler’s analyses are rich, though at times not very deeply developed. At least in this book, his critical comments are supported by a broader theoretical framework, even though some of Stiegler’s reflections could easily be connected not only to the Frankfurt School but also to authors such as Marazzi and Virno. Despite the lack of a broader social theory, Stiegler’s sharp intellectual eye reveals many aspects of contemporary capitalism that are of central importance for a contemporary critical theory of capitalism.

Stiegler’s call for a new Critique of Political Economy is based on two major claims by means of which he tries to separate himself from his Marxist predecessors: 1) on the one hand, Stiegler claims that Marx was unable to foresee that a new libidinal economy would emerge in the twentieth century that is no longer centered around the worker as *the laboring producer* since it focuses on *the psyche of workers*, given that the mass consumption of products plays an important part in the expansion of capitalism. The “aim of creating available purchasing power” (27) leads to a shift in thinking about proletarianization, namely, to a new form of proletarianization as the proletarianization of the consumer (rather than of the producer). Indeed, as Stiegler puts it, “consumerism transforms everything into needs, that is, into subsistence, and liquidates desire” (65); in addition, according to him, this destruction is closely connected to a system of frustrations (83). What is experienced as need is now controlled by the capitalist system, especially since any desire for something outside of consumption has been destroyed. 2) On the other hand, the overall driving force behind the expansion of capitalism is the industrialization of mental activities and abilities. The externalization of knowledge in the form of memory, according to Stiegler, is an anthropological and evolutionary fact, but the constitution of memory through industry occurred during the nineteenth century, first in the form of machines and nowadays through digital and biotechnologies. In our time, though, we enter what Stiegler calls the “hyperindustrial” period within which cognitive and cultural industries control knowledge, as this knowledge is externalized in the form of digital media, biotechnologies, and, more recently, nanotechnologies. What we can observe, in other words, is that not only life itself, but also the

[Comment on this review](#)

About the reviewer

Christian Lotz

Christian Lotz is a Professor of Philosophy at Michigan State University, East Lansing MI

christianlotz.wordpress.com

[More...](#)

whole range of the mind is *turned into* technics (i.e., *not simply based upon* them). What happened, according to Stiegler, is that technology not only took over language (through writing, books, machines, computerization, media, standardizations, etc.), but now includes the whole psychic and sensory apparatus of humans: vision, auditory systems, touch, pain, etc. The whole range of the *noein*, in other words, is in the process of being *produced* by these industries.

Stiegler concludes that because of this the status of the body in Marx's theory of the alienated worker has been enlarged and expanded to encompass the whole anthropological range of the human: we are no longer faced with the externalization of the body in machines (i.e., what Stiegler calls "grammatization"); rather, "*all forms of knowledge become grammatized via cognitive and cultural mnemotechnologies*" (33). We arrive, consequently, at a "cognitive capitalism", the most visible forms of which are communication and storage devices, which include the internet, the electrification of virtually all household tasks, the entertainment technologies, the sciences, and, ultimately, system networks on all levels. Moreover, Stiegler defines the proletariat as "those economic actors who are without knowledge because they are without memory" (35). Stiegler's forceful claim, accordingly, is that the alienation of the worker is not simply the effect of an interrupted relationship to her body, the product of production and the laboring activity; rather, the laboring human *as such* is now being externalized and, consequently, remains *outside of him- or herself*.

Following this line of reasoning, Stiegler claims that traditional Marxist thought "confused proletarianization and pauperization" (60). It should be obvious that according to Stiegler, proletarianization is not only the effect of class struggle, since, in his view, all formerly "human" activities are being replaced by industrialized memory technologies. Similarly to Marx, who already foresaw that the whole middle class could potentially sink to the level of the proletariat, Stiegler argues that the twentieth Century shift to a capitalism based on consumption expands proletarianization to virtually every activity within society, as the economy is now about desire and the control of the psyche that is made possible by technics. Nowadays, this process already starts in early childhood through DVDs, TV, computers, electronic music devices, etc. Consciousness is externalized early on and is thereby controlled by industrial processes. Even the area of knowledge and knowledge production has been subjected to this process. For not only engineers, but also designers and all laborers who labor upon theoretical knowledge have been proletarianized, as cognitive technologies take over knowledge: "We thus have *pure cognitive labor power utterly devoid of knowledge*" (46), as knowledge is no longer available as a human *capacity*; rather, it has been externalized in memory technologies. No one, in other words, really *knows* how everything works and hangs together. As Stiegler puts it, we produce more and more "information without knowledge" (129).

Naturally, Stiegler has something to say about the current financial crisis, which demonstrates, according to Stiegler, that the financial elites have been proletarianized themselves, as they have lost all knowledge of what the economy substantially is and how it works. Furthermore, the power of the financial system and its disconnection from the productive system leads to the "liquidation of social relations" (57), the "dictatorship of short-termism" (57), and a "process of desolidarization" (58), which not only creeps into all general social relations, but is also visible in the asocial attitude of the rich elites of the Western nations. The capitalist system is starting to control all references to the future "by turning belief into something calculable" (67). Every mental act, according to Stiegler's theory as presented in other texts, is already based upon technics of memorization and externalization. Now, these technical milieux are in the process of becoming completely controlled by noetic industries that are controlled by financial industries. Money and credit, in other words, organize the future ahead of time. In countries within which credit cards, house loans, and financial capital rule, minds and wills are increasingly instrumentalized, schematized, and controlled by functionalities. Unfortunately, this short-term thinking leads to the "disposability" of everything (83), i.e., to the loss of long-term goals and entities, events, or actions that remain outside of a calculable system. The short-term thinking and the long-term capitalization of individual lives results in "closing the system off from any future, that is, to a blockage of the process of anticipation" (91). Ultimately all this leads to a

“destruction of temporalities ... which are not immediately monetizable” (103). The whole interior mental system, including affectivity, sensibility, and attention, has been colonized by other systems, such as the economic and the technical system (116). Capitalism, consequently, is, for Stiegler, a “question of psychopower” (96), because it has taken control of and structures the mind, including its biological basis.

One could say many things about Stiegler’s forceful picture of the current state of affairs. In what follows, I shall deal only with the question of whether we really need a *new* critique of political economy.

If we read Marx’s *Critique of Political Economy* through the recent reception of scholars such as Arthur, Heinrich, Backhaus and Reichelt, and understand economic categories according to an ontology of value, then it should be fairly transparent that the phenomena that Stiegler has in mind are *implied* in Marx’s *Critique of Political Economy*. For example, money, as one of the central categories of bourgeois economy and of its theories, seen from this point of view, emerges as a category out of an objectively occurring abstraction and exchange, and, as a result, every entity can take on the money form. Once this takes place, the categories such as interest, capital, credit, etc., can develop *purely* in abstraction from the social process of production that underlies use values. What we need to understand, then, is the act of abstraction that occurs in the constitution of the commodity form as commodity form, and constitutes the commodity form as precisely the abstraction through which the whole system reproduces itself. As a consequence of the foregoing, Stiegler’s claim that mental capacities have been externalized through technology, industrialized memory, and digitization, should be corrected, as it is rather the case that the *form of value as something universal and abstract* leads to the *opening up of all beings* (including bodies and minds) for taking on this form of abstraction. For Marx, economy is not a *partial* system of the social reality; instead, it is the *synthetic form of the society as a whole*. Consequently, the being of beings appears through the objective abstraction in a new light, namely, in the light of the commodity form. Thus, nothing – no tradition, no entity, no relation – can be conceived *in principle* outside of this form. As this includes our relationship to nature, it is clear that this also contains our whole natural constitution, including our mental capacities and our biological structures, i.e., structures with which Stiegler is concerned.

Moreover, since everything done and produced in our world is already under the spell of the value form, our *imaginary* relationships and our entire relation towards the future has already been subjected to this form, for example in the form of calculations and monetary control. On the one hand, as Marx already noted in his early writings on Mill, through loans and credit the whole of human life became transformed, calculable, and led to distrust (i.e., desolidarization). On the other hand, the imaginary relationships are entirely structured by the value form because, nowadays, we not only produce but also act (in general) with the goal and memory of exchangeability and commodities in mind. We pre-vision the outcome, so to speak, and thereby subject the productive imagination to capital. This process of monetarization is also visible in what has recently been called “accumulation by dispossession” (David Harvey), which refers to the destruction of traditionally nonmonetary areas of human life through the expansion of capitalism, especially through privatization, financialization of age and health, the manipulation of crises, repossession of property, and state redistributions. Not only is this expansion carried out as a geographical process (though this is again visible today mostly in the form of “land grabbing,” particularly in Africa and in South America), it is also expanded into virtually all areas of human life, including potential life and formerly “natural” resources, such as water and air. As a consequence, the destruction of our mental apparatus that we come to acknowledge through Stiegler’s critique, seems to be the effect of the value and commodity form and not, as Stiegler claims, the effect of the technological externalization of memory. What Stiegler calls “consciousness industry” is, “simply,” the result of the value form expanding into formerly untouched areas of mental activity (viz., certain deep seated psychological structures and habits). One could say that capital now moves through “accumulation by dispossession” *inside*, namely, inside the mind and inside the body. As such, it thereby dispossesses us of our own psyche and body. Instead of following Stiegler’s rhetorical machine, then, we should reconsider carefully the role of the value form for *all* social relations. The exchange principle is, as Adorno claimed throughout his lifetime, the principle that determines all social relations.

Contemporary dominant social theory disconnected social, moral, and legal terms from economic principles and, given the current crisis and the (real) threat that whole societies are in danger of crumbling, there are good empirical and theoretical reasons to readjust our social concepts. As I have indicated, the commodity form *contains* all aspects that Stiegler takes to be the *effect* of the technological milieu. Accordingly, what I propose is that the content needs to be derived from its form, and not the other way around. Consequently, what we need to do is to *revive and actualize* Marx's Critique of Political Economy. *We are not in need of a new one; rather, we need the old one back.*

22 January 2012

Comments

Write a comment

Name:

Email:

Comment:

Your comment will be submitted to moderators for approval.

Source: *Marx and Philosophy Review of Books*. Accessed 17 December 2016

URL: <http://marxandphilosophy.org.uk/reviewofbooks/reviews/2012/476>



This review is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.