

# Communisation and Value-Form Theory

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An article from the second issue of the Endnotes journal, elaborating on the background, emergence and connection between communisation and value-form theory, found [here](#).

## Introduction

The value-form of the product of labour is the most abstract, but also the most universal form of the bourgeois mode of production; by that fact it stamps the bourgeois mode of production as a particular kind of social production of a historical and transitory character.<sup>1</sup>

In [Endnotes 1](#) we described the emergence of the theory of communisation in France in the years following May 68. The following text and others in this issue operate within this perspective of communisation, but they also draw heavily upon theoretical developments in the area of Marxian value-form theory and, in particular, upon the tendency of “systematic dialectic” which has emerged in recent years.<sup>2</sup>

Marx was clear that what distinguished his approach, and what made it a critique rather than a continuation of political economy, was its analysis of the form of value. In his celebrated exposition of “The Fetish-Character of the Commodity and its Secret” he writes:

Political economy has indeed analysed value and its magnitude, however incompletely, and has uncovered the content concealed within this form. But it has never once asked the question why this content has assumed that particular form, that is to say, why labour is expressed in value, and why the measurement of labour by its duration is expressed in the magnitude of the value of the product. These forms, which bear the unmistakable stamp of belonging to a social formation in which the process of production has mastery over man, instead of the opposite, appear to the political economists’ bourgeois consciousness to be as much a self-evident and nature-imposed necessity as productive labour itself.<sup>3</sup>

Despite such statements by Marx, the connection between the value-form and fetishism – the inversion where humans are dominated by the results of their own activity – did not play much role in the interpretation of *Capital* until the 1960s. Instead, accounts of “Marx’s economics” emphasised the apparently simple argument

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<sup>1</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol.1 (MECW 35), pp.91-2 n. 2 (Fowkes translation).

<sup>2</sup> A by no means exhaustive list of authors here would include Chris Arthur, Werner Bonefeld, Hans George Backhaus, Riccardo Bellofiore, Michael Eldred, Michael Heinrich, Hans Jürgen Krahl, Patrick Murray, Moishe Postone, Helmut Reichelt, Geert Reuten, Ali Shamsavari, Felton Shortall, Tony Smith, Michael Williams.

<sup>3</sup> Marx, *Capital*, vol.1 (MECW 35), pp.91-2 (translation amended).

in the first two sections of chapter one of *Capital*, where labour is identified as lying behind the value of commodities. The latter two sections of the chapter – on the value-form and fetishism – were generally taken as a more or less convoluted way of describing the market, and passed over quickly. Thus the careful way Marx distinguished his understanding from the classical political economy of Ricardo was not explored.<sup>4</sup>

When Marxists insisted on the “labour theory of value”, they did so in terms of the quantitative issue of the substance and magnitude of value rather than the qualitative issue of the form of value. Against the neo-classical revolution in bourgeois economics, which repudiated the labour theory of value, Marxists tended to assert the classical position that labour is the substance of value and that value is the labour embodied in the product. Like the classical political economists, Marxists failed to address the peculiarity of the social process of reduction that is necessary for such quantitative magnitudes to be compared. That is to say, they too did not ask the question of why labour appears in the value-form of its product, and what kind of labour can so appear. Yet as Marx indicates, it is only by understanding the intricacy of the value-form that one can understand the subsequent forms of money and capital, or how human activity takes the form of the accumulation of capital.

For Marx, the value-form is an expression of the dual character of labour in capitalism – its character as concrete labour appearing in the use-value of the commodity, and its character as abstract labour appearing in the value-form. Though abstract labour is historically specific to capitalism, the failure to properly distinguish these two aspects of labour means that the value-form is taken as an expression of simple natural human labour as such. Labour as the content or substance of value was seen to be physiological labour – something independent of its social form. Here substance is taken to be something that naturally resides in the object, but for Marx abstract labour and value are more peculiar than that. Value is a relation or process that unfolds itself and maintains itself through different forms – in one moment money, the next the commodities that compose the labour process (including the commodity labour-power), the next the commodity product, and then again money – whilst always maintaining a relation in its money form to its commodity form and vice versa. For Marx then, value is not the embodiment of labour in the commodity, nor an unmoving substance. It is rather a relation or process which dominates those who bear it: a substance that is at the same time subject. Yet in the orthodox Marxist tradition there was no recognition that “abstract labour” was a socially and historically specific formatting of one part of human activity, implying the conversion of human beings into a resource for the boundless increase of this activity and its result as an end in itself. Understanding value as merely a form imposed – by the private ownership of the means of production – on a basic unproblematic content, went together with a vision of socialism as a state-directed version of essentially the same industrial division of labour that is organised by the market in capitalism. On this view labour, which was restricted by market forms under capitalism, would become the

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<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Marx himself seemed to recognise that there was a problem with his analysis of the value-form, which led him to make at least four versions of the argument. There are notable differences between the development of value in the *Grundrisse*, *Urtext*, the *Contribution*, the first edition of *Capital* with its appendix, and the second edition of *Capital*; and the later versions can by no means be assumed to be improvements in every way on those that went before. Indeed the somewhat more popularising later presentations – which Marx developed in response to the difficulty which even those close to him had in understanding him – lose some of the dialectical subtleties, and lend themselves more towards the left-Ricardian reading of Marx’s argument which would dominate the workers’ movement. See Hans-Georg Backhaus, ‘On the Dialectics of the Value-Form’ *Thesis Eleven* 1 (1980); Helmut Reichelt, ‘Why Marx Hid his Dialectical Method’ in Werner Bonefeld et al., eds., *Open Marxism* vol. 3 (Pluto Press 1995).

conscious organising principle of society in socialism.

A major exception to the traditional Marxist neglect of the value-form and fetishism was the Russian economist Isaak Rubin. In path-breaking work in the twenties, he recognised that “[t]he theory of fetishism is, per se, the basis of Marx’s entire economic system and in particular of his theory of value,”<sup>5</sup> and that abstract labour as the content of value is not “something to which form adheres from the outside. Rather, through its development, the content itself gives birth to the form which was already latent in the content.”<sup>6</sup> But Rubin’s work, suppressed in Russia, remained more or less unknown. For the orthodoxy – “Marxist political economy” – the fact that bourgeois critics saw Marx as essentially a follower of Ricardo was not contested. Rather, he was defended on exactly this basis as having correctly tidied up Ricardo’s recognition of labour as the content of value, and of labour-time as its magnitude – adding only a more or less left-Ricardian theory of exploitation. On this view labour is something that exists quasi-naturalistically in the product, and exploitation is seen as an issue of the distribution of that product – thus the “solution” to capitalism is seen as workers, via the state or other means, shifting that distribution in their favour. If exploitation is a matter of the deduction of a portion of the social product by a parasitic ruling class then socialism does not have to substantially alter the form of commodity production; but may simply take it over, eliminate the parasitic class, and distribute the product equitably.

### **A Common Background**

The occlusion of form and fetishism within the reading of *Capital* only began to be seriously challenged from the mid-1960s – partly through a rediscovery of Rubin – in a number of approaches that have at one time or another been labelled “value-form theory.” The debates on the subtleties of the value-form, on issues of method, on the question of Marx’s relation to Hegel and so on, emerged then, at the same moment as the theory of communisation. Both value-form theory and communisation express dissatisfaction with received interpretations of Marx, and thus a rejection of “orthodox” or “traditional” Marxism.<sup>7</sup> For us, there is an implicit commonality between value-form theory and the theory of communisation such that each may productively inform the other. We will here examine the historical parallels, and points of convergence, between these two tendencies.

From the middle of the 1960s to the late 70s capitalism at a world level was characterised by intense class struggles and radical social movements: from the urban uprisings in the USA to insurrectionary strikes in Poland, from student movements and “youth revolt” to the toppling of elected and unelected governments by workers’ unrest. Accepted relations at work were questioned, as was the family, gender and sexuality, mental health, and humans’ relationship to nature, in a general contestation across society. Intertwined with these struggles, the post-war boom ended in a crisis of capitalist accumulation with high inflation and rising unemployment. The revolutionary overcoming of capitalism and its pseudo-alternative in the eastern

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<sup>5</sup> Isaak Rubin, *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value* (Black & Red 1972), p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.117. Riccardo Bellofiore has pointed out that Rosa Luxemburg was another exception among traditional Marxists in paying close attention to the value-form. See his introduction to *Rosa Luxemburg and the Critique of Political Economy* (Routledge 2009), p.6.

<sup>7</sup> Orthodoxy has come to mean dogmatic Marxism. Lukács made an interesting attempt to redeem the sense of orthodoxy by saying it referred exclusively to method. Perhaps out of this ambiguity of what ‘orthodoxy’ can mean, the terms ‘worldview’ Marxism and ‘traditional Marxism’ have been used by critical Marxists to refer to the received interpretations of Marx they wish to overthrow. Here we will use orthodox and traditional Marxism interchangeably.

countries seemed to many to be on the agenda.

The emergence of both the critical Marxism of value-form theory and the theory of communisation was premised on these struggles and the revolutionary hopes they engendered. Just as these two tendencies were produced in the same moment, they waned simultaneously with the wave of struggles that had produced them. The 70s crisis of accumulation, rather than leading to an intensification of struggles and their development in a revolutionary direction, actually gave rise to a radical capitalist restructuring in which the movements and the revolutionary expectations linked to them were comprehensively defeated. This restructuring led to the relative eclipse of these discussions. Just as the discussion of communisation in France emerged in the early 70s, only to fade away in the 80s and early 90s before resurfacing again recently, contemporary interest in “systematic dialectic” is in many ways a return to the value-form debates of the 70s, after a period when the discussion had gone relatively quiet.

### **Communisation**

It is not the unity of living and active humanity with the natural, inorganic conditions of their metabolic exchange with nature, and hence their appropriation of nature, which requires explanation or is the result of a historic process, but rather the separation between these inorganic conditions of human existence and this active existence, a separation which is completely posited only in the relation of wage labour and capital.<sup>8</sup>

The theory of communisation emerged as a critique of various conceptions of the revolution inherited from both the 2nd and 3rd International Marxism of the workers’ movement, as well as its dissident tendencies and oppositions. The experiences of revolutionary failure in the first half of the 20th century seemed to present as the essential question, whether workers can or should exercise their power through the party and state (Leninism, the Italian Communist Left), or through organisation at the point of production (anarcho-syndicalism, the Dutch-German Communist Left). On the one hand some would claim that it was the absence of the party – or of the right kind of party – that had led to revolutionary chances being missed in Germany, Italy or Spain, while on the other hand others could say that it was precisely the party, and the “statist,” “political” conception of the revolution, that had failed in Russia and played a negative role elsewhere.

Those who developed the theory of communisation rejected this posing of revolution in terms of forms of organisation, and instead aimed to grasp the revolution in terms of its content. Communisation implied a rejection of the view of revolution as an event where workers take power followed by a period of transition: instead it was to be seen as a movement characterised by immediate communist measures (such as the free distribution of goods) both for their own merit, and as a way of destroying the material basis of the counter-revolution. If, after a revolution, the bourgeoisie is expropriated but workers remain workers, producing in separate enterprises, dependent on their relation to that workplace for their subsistence, and exchanging with other enterprises, then whether that exchange is self-organised by the workers or given central direction by a “workers’ state” means very little: the capitalist content remains, and sooner or later the distinct role or function of the capitalist will reassert itself. By contrast, the revolution as a communising movement would destroy – by ceasing to constitute and reproduce them – all capitalist categories: exchange, money, commodities, the existence of separate enterprises, the state and – most

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<sup>8</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, (MECW 28), p.413 (Nicolaus translation).

fundamentally – wage labour and the working class itself.

Thus the theory of communisation arose in part from the recognition that opposing the Leninist party-state model with a different set of organisational forms – democratic, anti-authoritarian, councils – had not got to the root of the matter. In part, this new kind of thinking about revolution arose from the characteristics and forms of the class struggle which came to the fore in this period – such as sabotage, absenteeism and other forms of refusal of work – and from social movements outside the workplace, all of which could be seen to reject the affirmation of work and of workers' identity as the basis of revolution. A great spur to the development of the notion of communisation was the work of the *Situationist International* (SI) who, with their perspective of a total revolution rooted in the transformation of everyday life, had felt and theorised the new needs being expressed in struggles, and thus were later recognised as best anticipating and expressing the spirit of the 1968 events in France.

But if the concept of communisation was in a sense a product of the struggles and developments of the time, the capacity of the French milieu to give expression to it was inseparable from a return to Marx, and in particular the discovery and diffusion of the “unknown Marx” of texts such as the *Grundrisse* and the *Results of the Direct Production Process* (hereafter *Results*). Before these texts became available in the late sixties, the SI and other critics of orthodox Marxism had tended to draw on the early Marx such as the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844. Even in the case of the SI and the Frankfurt School, where there was also use of a theory of fetishism and reification drawn from *Capital*, this was mediated through Lukács, and not a product of a detailed appropriation of the three volumes of *Capital*. Thus the mature critique of political economy as a whole tended to be left in the hands of traditional Marxism. As we have already indicated, the relevance of Marx's description of his work as a *critique* of political economy, the importance of the value-form and of fetishism, were overwhelmingly missed within this positivistic interpretation. The newly available texts such as the *Grundrisse* undermined the traditional readings and allowed the radicality of the mature critique to be recognised.

Through their marginal relation to orthodox Marxism, those who identified with left-communist critiques of Bolshevism and of what had happened in Russia were in a good position to read the newly available Marx texts. Very important in the French context was Jacques Camatte and the journal *Invariance* which first appeared in 1968. As well as expressing an opening up of the heritage of the ‘Bordigist’ Italian Left tradition both to the experience of the Dutch-German left, and to the unfolding struggles of the time, *Invariance* was a place for a fresh reading of Marx. Camatte's one-time collaborator – Roger Dangeville – translated the *Grundrisse* and the *Results* into French – putting a spanner in the works of the Althusserian anti-Hegelian interpretation of Marx dominant in France. In *Invariance* Camatte published an important commentary on these texts.<sup>9</sup>

Camatte's text played a similar role for the French post-68 discussions to that played at the same time by Rosdolsky's *The Making of Marx's Capital* for the discussions that were to follow in Germany.<sup>10</sup> Both rely heavily on quotations to introduce and explore the significance of texts by Marx that were largely unknown at the time.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Camatte, *Capital and Community: the Results of the Immediate Process of Production and the Economic Works of Marx* (Unpopular Books 1998). Originally published in *Invariance* Series I no. 2 (1968).

<sup>10</sup> Roman Rosdolsky, *The Making of Marx's Capital* (Pluto Press 1977). German original published in 1968.

Rosdolsky provides a comprehensive study of the *Grundrisse*, while Camatte's less systematic account draws on other of Marx's drafts, in particular the *Results*. While Camatte acknowledges the merits of Rosdolsky's book,<sup>11</sup> a difference is that while Rosdolsky ultimately reduces the *Grundrisse* to a mere preparation for *Capital*, Camatte is more attuned to the way in which it, and the other drafts of *Capital*, point beyond the understanding Marxists had derived from the latter work. Camatte recognised that the different ways Marx introduced and developed the category of value in the various versions of the critique of political economy have a significance beyond a progressive improvement of the presentation. Some of the earlier treatments bring out aspects such as the historical autonomisation of value, the definition of capital as value in process, and the importance of the category of subsumption, in ways that are not as clear in the published versions. One finds in Camatte's reading of the newly available texts a recognition that the implications of Marx's critique of political economy were far more radical than the positivistic Marxist interpretation of *Capital* had taken them to be.<sup>12</sup>

There is a fascinating break from traditional Marxist assumptions in Camatte's work, one that is brought out sharply in the contrast between his original commentary from the mid-sixties and the notes he added in the early seventies. Thus while the earlier commentary grapples with the classical Marxist theory of the transition, in the later notes we see the assumptions of this theory overthrown.<sup>13</sup> Thus Camatte concludes his 1972 remarks with a call for communisation:

The near totality of men rising against the totality of capitalist society, the struggle simultaneously against capital and labour, two aspects of the same reality: i.e. the proletariat must struggle against its own domination so as to be able to destroy itself as class and to destroy capital and classes. Once victory is assured worldwide, the universal class which is really constituted (formation of the party according to Marx) during a huge process preceding the revolution in the struggle against capital, and which is psychologically transformed and has transformed society, will disappear, because it becomes humanity. There are no groups outside it. Communism then develops freely. Lower socialism no longer exists, and the phase of the dictatorship of the proletariat is reduced to the struggle to destroy capitalist society, the power of capital.<sup>14</sup>

For most subsequent theorists of communisation, the previously unavailable writings of Marx became basic texts. The translation of the *Grundrisse* and its now famous "fragment on machines" directly informed Gilles Dauvé's prototypical argument for communisation.<sup>15</sup> In this fragment Marx describes how capital, in its drive to increase surplus labour time, reduces necessary labour time to a minimum through

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<sup>11</sup> Camatte nonetheless criticizes Rosdolsky for 'not getting to the point of stating what we believe is fundamental: capital is value in process, becoming man.' Jacques Camatte, *Capital and Community* (Unpopular Books 1998) p. 163.

<sup>12</sup> This is a way of reading the *Grundrisse* that later becomes identified with Negri. Indeed it has been argued that the early work of the latter owes something to Camatte. Strikingly whatever the ambivalences of autonomist politics, the chapter 'Communism and Transition' in Negri's *Marx Beyond Marx* (1978) essentially makes an argument for communisation.

<sup>13</sup> Commenting on his earlier idea of a 'formal domination of communism' Camatte writes: 'the periodisation loses its validity today; also the rapidity of the realization of communism will be greater than was previously thought. Finally we must specify that communism is neither a mode of production, nor a society...' Ibid., p.148, n.19.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>15</sup> Gilles Dauvé 'Sur L'Ultragauche' (1969), first published in English as 'Leninism and the Ultraleft' in: Jean Barrot (Gilles Dauvé) and François Martin, *Eclipse and Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement* (Black and Red, 1974), p. 104.

the massive application of science and knowledge to production. This creates the possibility of the appropriation by all of that alienated system of knowledge, allowing the re-appropriation of this surplus labour time as disposable time. Communism is thus understood not in terms of a new distribution of the same sort of wealth based in labour time, but as founded on a new form of wealth measured in disposable time.<sup>16</sup> Communism is about nothing less than a new relation to time, or even a different kind of time. For Dauvé, by this focus on time, Marx implies a radical break between capitalism and communism which “exclude[s] the hypothesis of any gradual way to communism through the progressive destruction of the law of value” and thus proves the councilist and democratic alternative to Leninism as itself inadequate.<sup>17</sup>

The earlier drafts also pointed towards a more radical concept of revolution at a more fundamental ontological level. The drafts reveal that for Marx the critique of political economy calls into question the division of subjectivity and objectivity, the givenness of what it is to be an individual, and what is, and is not, our very being. For Marx these ontological questions are essentially social. He considered that the political economists had more or less succeeded in clarifying the categories which grasped the social forms of life under capitalism. While the bourgeoisie, however, tended to present these as ahistorical necessities, Marx recognised them as historically specific forms of the relationship between humans, and between humans and nature. The fact that human activity is mediated by social relations between things generates an atomised, object-less character to human subjectivity. The individual experience in capitalism is one of pure subjectivity, with all objectivity existing against it in the form of capital:

Separation of property from labour appears as the necessary law of this exchange between capital and labour. Labour posited as *not-capital* as such is: (1) *not-objectified labour, conceived negatively* [...] separated from all means and objects of labour, from its entire objectivity. This living labour, existing as an abstraction from these moments of its actual reality (also, not-value); this complete denudation, purely subjective existence of labour, stripped of all objectivity. Labour as *absolute poverty*: absolute poverty [...] (2) *Not-objectified labour, not-value, conceived positively*, or as a negativity in relation to itself [...]. Labour not as an object, but as activity; not as itself *value*, but as the *living source* of value. [T]he in-every-way mutually contradictory statements that labour is *absolute poverty as object*, on one side, and is, on the other side, the *general possibility* of wealth as subject and as activity, are reciprocally determined and follow from the essence of labour, such as it is *presupposed* by capital as its contradiction and as its contradictory being, and such as it, in turn, presupposes capital.<sup>18</sup>

Such ontological considerations play a major role in the work of *Théorie Communiste* (TC), a group that emerged in the mid-seventies from the discussions of the post-68 communisation milieu. For TC the communist revolution understood as communisation does not establish a “republic of labour” or any new form of management of the means of production. Rather, it is the overcoming of the alienated social relation of production which constitutes the separation of subjectivity and objectivity experienced in capitalism. In the overcoming of the separation of individuals from each

<sup>16</sup> ‘For real wealth is the developed productive power of all individuals. Then wealth is no longer measured by labour time but by disposable time.’ Marx, *Grundrisse* (MECW 29), p. 94. It is interesting that Moishe Postone who has been explicit about the radical political implications of a ‘value-form’ approach makes these passages basic to his reinterpretation of Marx. See: *Time, Labor and Social Domination* (Cambridge University Press 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Gilles Dauvé, *Eclipse and Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement* (Black and Red, 1974), p. 61.

<sup>18</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse* (MECW 28), pp. 221-2

other and from the means of production, communisation overcomes the separation of human subjectivity from “objectified labour,”<sup>19</sup> i.e. the subject/object split that forms the basis of social reality under capitalism. TC envisage this as an overcoming of each dimension which Marx describes in the *Grundrisse*: labour ceases to exist as a separate activity; production no longer distinguishes itself from and dominates reproduction; needs are no longer separate from capacities; and individuals no longer confront their sociality through the mediation of the exchange of their products or in the form of the state – they become *directly* social. The revolution as communisation dissolves both the social form of things, i.e. their existence as carriers of ‘objectified labour’, of value (they become things again), and the atomised, empty and separated out subject-form of the individual. Thus for TC, as for Marx in the *Grundrisse*,<sup>20</sup> the formerly “objective” moment of production no longer dominates the subjective, but rather becomes “the organic social body in which the individuals reproduce themselves as individuals, but as social individuals.”<sup>21</sup>

### The German Debates

The fresh appropriation of Marx out of which the perspective of communisation arose was part of a much wider process of the re-appropriation and development of radical readings of Marx. After the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, official communism no longer had a hegemony over dissent and the interpretation of Marx in Western countries. While Marx had said “doubt everything,” orthodox or traditional Marxism tended to present itself as a unified worldview with an answer to every question. It had an all-embracing philosophy (“Dialectical Materialism”), a mechanistic view of history (“Historical Materialism”), and its own economics (“Marxist Political Economy”).<sup>22</sup> These pillars of the official version of Marxism were called into question by a return to Marx’s critical spirit, in much the same way that an earlier generation of critical Marxism had flowered in the immediate wake of the Russian revolution.<sup>23</sup>

The revitalisation of Marxian theory in this period – as in the twenties – involved a break from seeing Marxism as a positive system of knowledge, and a re-recognition of its critical dimension – a move in which Marx’s relation to Hegel was again in question. By the mid-sixties, the rejection of received interpretations of Marx began to extend to *Capital* – his central work. New readings drew on earlier drafts of the critique of political economy, and were interested not just in the results Marx arrived at, but also in the method he used to get there. In France *Capital* was reread in a structuralist fashion, in Italy Tronti and *Operaismo* took it up “from the point of view of the working class,” and in Germany there arose a *Neue Marx-Lektüre* (New Marx Reading).

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<sup>19</sup> And from nature, which for capital is – like human beings – purely a resource for the expansion of abstract wealth.

<sup>20</sup> Yet TC’s claim is not that communisation was Marx’s concept of the revolution – see the discussion of ‘programmatisation’ below.

<sup>21</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse* (MECW 29), p. 210.

<sup>22</sup> For an interpretation of ‘traditional Marxism’ as ‘worldview Marxism’ see Michael Heinrich, ‘Invaders from Marx: On the Uses of Marxian Theory, and the Difficulties of a Contemporary Reading’, *Left Curve* 31 (2007) pp. 83–8. This way of characterising ‘traditional Marxism’ seems to originate with the humanist Marxist Iring Fetscher, under whom both Reichelt and Postone studied. See his *Marx and Marxism* (Herder and Herder 1971).

<sup>23</sup> Works that stand out from that period are Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness*, Korsch’s *Marxism and Philosophy*, Rubin’s *Essays on Marx’s Theory of Value* and Pashukanis’ *Law and Marxism*. One of the features of the new period was a rediscovery of many of the texts of this earlier period, and a deepening of their problematic.



The German language gave the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* a clear advantage over investigations into Marx in other countries. The new texts of the “unknown Marx” generally became available and known in German before any other language, and there were of course no issues of translation.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the great cultural resource that Marx had used in the critique of political economy – classical German idealism – was not subject to the same problems of the reception of Hegelian thought as in other countries. Thus, while in Italy and France the new readings of Marx tended to have a strong anti-Hegel bias as a reaction against earlier fashions for Hegelianism and “Hegelian Marxism”, the German discussions were able to develop a more nuanced and informed picture of the Hegel-Marx connection. Crucially they saw that in describing the logical structure of the real totality of capitalist social relations, Marx in *Capital* was indebted not so much to Hegel’s conception of a historical dialectic, but to the systematic dialectic of the *Logic*. The new critical Marxism, sometimes disparagingly referred to as *Kapitallogik*, thus had less in common with the earlier critical Marxism of Lukács and Korsch than with that of Rubin and Pashukanis. The *Neue Marx-Lektüre* was not a homogeneous school but a critical approach involving serious arguments and disagreements that nonetheless shared a certain direction.

The political context for the German debates was the rise of a radical student movement. The movement had two poles – one traditionalist, sometimes with links to the East German state and with an “orthodox Marxist” orientation to the labour movement, and a stronger “anti-authoritarian” pole influenced by the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, particularly its psychoanalytic dimension, which offered an explanation for why workers seemed uninterested in the revolution.<sup>25</sup> Due in no small part to the influence of the Frankfurt School, the German student movement quickly gained a reputation for the theoretical sophistication of its debates. The insights but also the instability and ambivalence of the “anti-authoritarian” pole were expressed in the trajectory of its charismatic leader Rudi Dutschke. In 1966, influenced strongly by Korsch, he historicised Marx’s “two stages theory” of the communist revolution as anachronistic and “highly questionable for us” since it “postpones the real emancipation of the working class in the future and considers seizing the bourgeois state by the proletariat as being of primary importance for social revolution.”<sup>26</sup> Yet he also coined the slogan “long march through the institutions” which became the *raison d’être* of the German Green party (which he, like that other charismatic anti-authoritarian Daniel Cohn-Bendit, went on to join). Today it is the thoroughly statist and reformist *Die Linke* (the leftist party in Germany) which identifies most strongly with his legacy. A more important figure theoretically was Hans Jürgen Krahl who also played a leading role in the SDS especially after Dutschke was shot. Krahl was a student of Adorno and brought many of the key concepts of Critical Theory into the movement, but he was also an activist – Adorno infamously had the cops called on him and his fellow students when they occupied one of the Institute’s buildings – and maintained an orientation to the proletariat and the class struggle.<sup>27</sup> Although the Frankfurt School, in its turn to issues of psychoanalysis,

<sup>24</sup> A significant example of this is that, as Chris Arthur notes, nearly all references to ‘embodied’ labour in *Capital* are translations of the German term *Darstellung* which could more properly be translated as ‘represented’. See ‘Reply to Critics’ *Historical Materialism* 13.2 (2005) p.217

<sup>25</sup> This included an interest in Freud and Reich combined with Adorno’s scathing attacks on the revisionism of contemporary psychoanalysis; Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilisation* and *One-Dimensional Man*; and the School’s analysis of the ‘authoritarian personality.’

<sup>26</sup> Rudi Dutschke, ‘Zur Literatur des revolutionären Sozialismus von K. Marx bis in die Gegenwart’ *SDS-korrespondenz* sondernummer 1966.

<sup>27</sup> Krahl died in a car crash in 1970. The posthumously published collection of his writings and talks – *Konstitution und Klassenkampf* – has not been translated into English.

culture and philosophy, had largely abandoned study of Marx's critique of political economy to the orthodox Marxists, it was Krahl and other students of Adorno – Hans George Backhaus, Helmut Reichelt – who initiated the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*.

Thus while for the communisation milieu it was a background in council communist and other left-communist critiques of Bolshevism that made them open to the radicality of the new Marx texts, in Germany – where such tendencies had been wiped out in the Nazi period<sup>28</sup> – a somewhat equivalent role was played by Adorno and the Frankfurt School. Both council communism and the Frankfurt School had developed as a reflection on the failure of the German Revolution of 1918-19. While council communism's relation to the German Revolution is the more direct, Sohn-Rethel, talking of the Frankfurt School and related thinkers Lukács and Bloch, captures their more complexly mediated relation to that period with a paradoxical formulation:

[T]he new development of thought which these people represent evolved as the theoretical and ideological superstructure of the revolution that never happened.<sup>29</sup>

Though detached from any working class milieu, the Frankfurt School had attempted to keep alive a critical and emancipatory Marxism against its development as an apologetic ideology for state-centred accumulation in Russia. The affinity with council communism is most clearly on display in earlier texts such as Horkheimer's *Authoritarian State*, which the anti-authoritarian students published to the disapproval of the rather conservative later Horkheimer. Nonetheless a radical critique of capitalist society remains at the centre of Adorno's less obviously political texts of the fifties and sixties – indeed perhaps even precisely due to their avoidance of the logic of immediate political effectiveness. While the “ultra-left” had attempted to keep alive the emancipatory promise of Marxist theory against the actual developments of labour movements by emphasising working class autonomy against working class representation and institutions, the Frankfurt School had paradoxically attempted the same task by turning away from the immediate class struggle and “economic questions.”

This meant that the radical re-appropriation of Marx in 1960s Germany necessarily took the form of both a continuation and a break from the legacy of the Frankfurt School. The intersection between a sensibility informed by the Frankfurt School, and a turn to the detailed study of the critique of political economy avoided by them, is expressed in an anecdote about Backhaus. According to Reichelt, the origins of the programme of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* may be traced to a moment in 1963 when Backhaus, while in student accommodation in Frankfurt, accidentally came across what was at that point a very rare first edition of *Capital*.<sup>30</sup> He noted that the

<sup>28</sup> A significant exception was Willy Huhn, who influenced some members of the Berlin SDS. A member of the *'Rote Kämpfer'*, a late 1920s regrouping of KAPD members, Huhn was briefly imprisoned by the Nazis in 1933/34 after which he turned to theoretical work including an important critique of Social democracy: *Der Etatismus der Sozialdemokratie: Zur Vorgeschichte des Nazifaschismus*. Nonetheless it was only after the peak of the movement that the council communists were properly rediscovered and published.

<sup>29</sup> He adds: ‘The paradoxical condition of this ideological movement may help to explain its almost exclusive preoccupation with superstructural questions, and the conspicuous lack of concern for the material and economic base that should have been underlying it.’ Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour* (Humanities Press 1978), p. xii. C.f. the first line of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*: ‘Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed.’ Theodore Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (Continuum 1983), p.3.

<sup>30</sup> The first German edition of *Capital* had major differences – especially in the structure and development of the first chapter on the commodity and value – from the second edition, which was the basis of the

differences from the second edition immediately leapt from the page, but that this was only possible because he had heard Adorno's lectures on the dialectical theory of society, for:

[H]ad not Adorno repeatedly put forward the idea of a “conceptual in reality itself”, of a real universal which can be traced back to the abstraction of exchange, without his questions about the constitution of the categories and their inner relation in political economy, and without his conception of an objective structure that has become autonomous, this text would have remained silent – just as it had been throughout the (then!) already one hundred years of discussion of Marx's theory of value.<sup>31</sup>

Debates around the new reading of *Capital* really got going after 1968. The issues they brought to the fore, which were generally taken up only later and often less profoundly in discussions in other languages, concerned: the character of Marx's method and the validity of Engels' understanding of it; the relation between the dialectical development of categories in *Capital* and Hegelian dialectics; the significance of the unfinished aspects of Marx's plans for his critique; the importance of the term “critique” and the difference between Marx's theory of value and that of classical political economy; and the nature of abstraction in Marx's concept of abstract labour and in the critique of political economy generally.

Despite their often philological and abstract character, debates around the new reading of *Capital* were seen to have a political importance in the tension between the anti-authoritarian and the traditionalist pole of the student movement, with the latter maintaining that the framework of orthodox Marxism needed only to be modernized and adjusted.<sup>32</sup> The *Neue Marx-Lektüre* challenged this project of a renewed orthodoxy through arguing for nothing less than a fundamental reconstruction of the critique of political economy.<sup>33</sup>

At the time the dominant view of the method at work in *Capital* was some variant of the logic-historical one proposed by Engels in texts such as his 1859 review of Marx's *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy*, and his Preface and Supplement to *Capital* Volume III. On this view, the progression of the categories of *Capital* closely follows their actual historical development, such that the first few chapters of *Capital* are seen to describe a pre-capitalist period of “simple commodity production” when the “law of value” was said to operate in a pure way. In the German discussions, and subsequently internationally, Engels' authority – as well as that of the traditional Marxism that depended on it – was comprehensively challenged.<sup>34</sup> The *Neue Marx-Lektüre* argued that neither Engels' interpretation, nor any of the proposed modifications of it,<sup>35</sup> did justice to the motion behind the order and development of the categories in *Capital*. Rather than an advance from a non-capitalist earlier

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little altered subsequent editions and translations into other languages.

<sup>31</sup> Helmut Reichelt, *Neue Marx-Lektüre: Zur Kritik sozialwissenschaftlicher Logik* (VSA-Verlag, 2008) p.11.

<sup>32</sup> While the traditional Marxist pole of the SDS up to 1968 had been essentially reformist, advocating a legal transition to socialism, that which came to the fore after 1968 was anti-revisionist Maoist-Stalinism. This was the period when many earlier ‘anti-authoritarians’ lost their critique of party-Marxism and engaged in the formation of the ‘K-Groups’ (‘K’ standing for Kommunist).

<sup>33</sup> See Michael Heinrich, ‘Reconstruction or Deconstruction? Methodological Controversies about Value and Capital, and New Insights from the Critical Edition’ in Riccardo Bellofiore and Roberto Fineschi, eds., *Re-Reading Marx: New Perspectives after the Critical Edition* (Palgrave Macmillan 2009).

<sup>34</sup> See ‘The Moving Contradiction’ below

<sup>35</sup> Grossman, for example, offered the idea of successive approximation in which *Capital* was seen to present a series of analytical models becoming more complex as further aspects of reality were added.

stage, or hypothetical simplified model, of simple commodity production to a later stage, or more complex model, of capitalist commodity production, the movement in *Capital* was to be grasped as a presentation of the capitalist totality from the outset, moving from the abstract to the concrete. In *The Logical Structure of Marx's Concept of Capital*, Helmut Reichelt developed a conception which, in one form or another, is now basic to theorists of systematic dialectic: that the "logic of the concept of capital" as a self-determining process corresponds to the going-beyond-itself of the concept in Hegel's *Logic*.<sup>36</sup> According to this view the world of capital can be seen as objectively idealist: e.g. the commodity is a "sensuous-supersensuous thing".<sup>37</sup> The dialectic of the value-form shows how, starting with the simplest commodity form, the material and concrete aspects of the social life process are dominated by the abstract and ideal social-forms of value. For Marx, as Reichelt puts it:

Capital is thus conceived as a constant change of forms, into which use-value is constantly both integrated and expelled. In this process, use-value too, assumes the form of an eternally vanishing object. But this constantly renewed disappearance of the object is the condition for the perpetuation of the value itself – it is through the always reproduced change of forms that the immediate unity between value and use-value is retained. What is thus constituted is an inverted world in which sensuousness in the widest sense – as use-value, labour, exchange with nature – is demoted to a means of the self perpetuation of an abstract process that underlies the whole objective world of constant change. [...] The whole sensuous world of human beings who reproduce themselves through the satisfaction of needs and labour is step-by-step sucked into this process, in which all activities are "in themselves inverted". They are all, in their vanishing appearance, immediately their own opposite; the persistence of the general."<sup>38</sup>

This is the ontological inversion, the possession of material life by the spirit of capital. It is what Camatte grasped in his recognition of the importance of the understanding of capital as value in process and as subsumption. If there is no use-value other than in the form of value in capitalist society, if value and capital constitute a forceful, totalising form of socialisation that shapes every aspect of life, their overcoming is not a matter of the mere replacement of market mechanisms through a state manipulation or workers' self-management of these forms, but demands a radical transformation of every sphere of life. By contrast, the traditional Marxist conception derived from Engels – according to which the law of value pre-existed capitalism – separated the theory of the market and value from that of surplus value and exploitation and thus opened up the possibility of ideas of a socialist law of value, a socialist form of money, "market socialism" and so forth.

### **The Incomplete Marx?**

Part of the dogmatic nature of orthodox Marxism was to take the works of Marx to be a complete system to which only historical analyses of subsequent stages of

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<sup>36</sup> Helmut Reichelt, *Zur logischen Struktur des Kapitalbegriffs bei Karl Marx* (Suhrkamp Verlag 1970). How close this correspondence is to be drawn is a subject of much debate. See the debates between Chris Arthur, Tony Smith and Robert Finelli in *Historical Materialism* (issues 11.1, 15.2 and 17.1). In Germany Michael Heinrich and Dieter Wolff would criticise in quite differing ways the idea of a 'homology' of capital and spirit.

<sup>37</sup> This is Bonefeld's more accurate translation of 'sinnlich übersinnlich' poorly translated in English editions of *Capital*. See his translator's note to: Helmut Reichelt, 'Social Reality as Appearance: Some Notes on Marx's Conception of Reality', in: Werner Bonefeld, and Kosmas Psychopedis, eds., *Human Dignity. Social Autonomy And The Critique Of Capitalism* (Hart Publishing 2005), p. 31.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46-47.

capitalism such as imperialism had to be added. The discovery of the drafts and plans for the critique of political economy showed that *Capital* was incomplete, not just in the sense that volumes two and three, and *Theories of Surplus Value*, were left unfinished by Marx and put together by Engels and Kautsky respectively,<sup>39</sup> but that these only constituted the first of a six book plan, alongside books on landed property, wage-labour, the state, foreign trade, and “The World Market and Crises.”<sup>40</sup> The recognition that what exists of Marx’s project is only a fragment was of tremendous importance, as this implied seeing Marxian theory as a radically open project, and developing areas of enquiry which were barely touched upon by Marx himself. The so-called state-derivation debate, and the debate on the world market, were attempts to develop some of those areas which Marx himself had not addressed systematically in *Capital*.<sup>41</sup>

Drawing on the pioneering work of Pashukanis, participants in the state-derivation debate grasped the separation of “the economic” and “the political” as something specific to capitalist domination. The implication was that – far from establishing a socialist economy and a workers’ state, as in traditional Marxism – the revolution should be grasped as the destruction of both “the economy” and “the state”. Despite the abstract – and at times scholastic – appearance of these debates, we thus begin to see how the critical return to Marx on the basis of the struggles of the late sixties in Germany had specific – and particularly radical – implications for how we conceive of the overcoming of the capitalist mode of production.

This is equally true for the core Marxian category of abstract labour as it is conceptualised in the German debates around value. Whereas in bourgeois social science, and in the dominant forms of Marxism, abstraction is a mental act, Marx argued that a different form of abstraction was present in capitalism: “real” or “practical abstraction” that people carry out in exchange without even knowing it. As Reichelt’s anecdote about Backhaus indicates, it was Adorno’s idea of an objective conceptuality to capitalist social life that inspired the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* approach to Marx’s critique of political economy. This idea of Adorno’s and his notion of ‘identity thinking’ had themselves been inspired by ideas that Sohn-Rethel had communicated to him in the thirties. The German discussion was thus advanced by the publication in 1970 of these ideas in Sohn-Rethel’s book *Intellectual and Manual Labour*.<sup>42</sup> In this work Sohn-Rethel identifies the abstraction from use carried out in the exchange process as at the root not only of the strange kind of social synthesis in commodity societies, but of the very existence of abstract conceptual reasoning and the experience of the independent intellect. Sohn-Rethel’s thesis is that the ‘transcendental

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<sup>39</sup> When Moscow republished *Theories of Surplus Value* they were able to question Kautsky’s editorial decisions, something they would never consider for the considerable changes done by Engels to volume III. Publication of the original Manuscripts (in German) reveals that Engels’ work involved major rewriting and questionable editorial decisions, but such questioning of the core corpus of Marxism was anathema to traditional Marxism. See Michael Heinrich: ‘Engels’ Edition of the Third Volume of Capital and Marx’s Original Manuscript’, in: *Science & Society*, vol. 60, no. 4, 1996, pp. 452-466

<sup>40</sup> Rosdolsky contentiously argues that the second and third books are incorporated into a changed plan for *Capital*, but even if one were to agree with him rather than the counter-arguments of Lebowitz and Shortall, the remaining three books clearly are unfinished business.

<sup>41</sup> For the state derivation debate see: John Holloway and Sol Picciotto, eds., *State and Capital: A Marxist Debate* (University of Texas Press 1978) and Karl Held and Audrey Hill, *The Democratic State: Critique of Bourgeois Sovereignty* (Gegenstandspunkt, 1993). Very little of the debate on the world market has been translated, but see: Oliver Nachtwey and Tobias ten Brink, ‘Lost in Transition: the German World-Market Debate in the 1970s,’ *Historical Materialism* 16.1 (2008), pp. 37-70.

<sup>42</sup> Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit. Zur Theorie gesellschaftlicher Synthesis* (Suhrkamp 1970). English translation: *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (Humanities Press 1978).

subject' as explicitly theorized by Kant is nothing else than a theoretical and at the same time blind expression of the unity or sameness of things constituted through exchange. Such ideas, along with those of Pashukanis on how the "legal subject" and commodity are co-produced historically, fed into a period of critical examination in which all aspects of life, including our very sense of inner subjectivity and consciousness, were grasped as form-determined by capital and value.

For Marx the most striking example of "real abstraction" is the money form of value, and perhaps the most far-reaching contribution of the German debates lies in their development of a "monetary theory of value" along the lines already laid out by Rubin. In an important passage from the 1st edition of *Capital* Marx describes money as an abstraction that perversely takes on a real-world existence independently of its particulars – "It is as if alongside and external to lions, tigers, rabbits, and all other actual animals ... there existed also in addition *the animal*, the independent incarnation of the entire animal Kingdom."<sup>43</sup> The products of private labour must be exchanged with this concrete representation of abstract labour for their social validity to be realised in actuality. Thus an abstraction – rather than a product of thought – exists in the world as an object with a social objectivity to which all must bow.

Traditional Marxism overlooked this discussion, and generally followed Ricardo and bourgeois economics in viewing money as simply a useful technical tool for facilitating the exchange of pre-existing commodity values. By contrast the German debates picked up on the strange kind of objectivity of value – that it does not inhere in any particular commodity, but only exists in the relation of equivalence between a commodity and the totality of other commodities – something that can only be brought about through money. This role of money in a generalised commodity society feeds back onto the experience of living labour itself. To the extent that labour is simply an activity carried out for money, the kind of labour performed is a matter of indifference and chance. The organic link that existed in previous societies between particular individuals and specific forms of labour is broken. A subject able to move indifferently between different forms of labour is developed:

Here, then, for the first time, the point of departure of modern economics, namely the abstraction of the category "labour", "labour as such", labour pure and simple, becomes true in practice. The simplest abstraction, then, which modern economics places at the head of its discussions, and which expresses an immeasurably ancient relation valid in all forms of society, nevertheless achieves practical truth as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society.<sup>44</sup>

Abstract labour then as a *practical* abstraction is a fundamentally capitalist form of labour – a product of the reduction of all activities to abstract money-generating activity. In the traditional view, the overcoming of the capitalist mode of production need not involve the abolition of abstract labour: abstract labour, according to this view, is a *generic* abstraction, a general transhistorical truth underlying the appearance of market forms within the capitalist mode of production. This truth would shine forth in socialism, with the parasitic role of the capitalist eliminated, and the anarchic market organisation of social labour replaced by (state) planning. From a critical perspective, traditional Marxism had turned capitalist forms and laws into general laws of history: in the relatively backward areas such as Russia, where Marxism became the ideology of state-led industrial development, *Capital* became a "how-

<sup>43</sup> Marx, 'The Commodity, Chapter One, Volume One of the first edition of *Capital*' in *Value: Studies by Karl Marx*, trans. A. Dragstedt (New Park 1976), p. 27.

<sup>44</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse* (MECW 28), p. 41 (Nicolaus trans.).

to manual.” By contrast, for the value-form theorists Marx’s theory of value, as a monetary theory of value, is “not a theory about the distribution of social wealth, but rather a theory of the constitution of the social totality under the conditions of capitalist commodity production.”<sup>45</sup> The issue was thus shifted from one of distribution to an overcoming of the form of labour, of wealth and the mode of production itself.

In different countries, sometimes in knowledge of the German discussions but also independently, motivated by texts such as the *Grundrisse* and Rubin’s *Essays*, similar questions were asked, and similar answers found. For example, the importance of the value-form was picked up by Althusser’s then-follower Jacques Rancière. Althusser had correctly identified Marx as making a complete break with the theoretical field of Ricardo and classical political economy but was unable to identify the analysis of the value-form as key to this break, because he rejected it for its “Hegelianism.” Rancière, however, noted that “what radically distinguishes Marx from classic economic theory is the analysis of the value-form of the commodity (or of the commodity form of the product of labour).”<sup>46</sup> This recognition was also taken up by another anti-Hegelian – Colletti<sup>47</sup> – and fed into an Italian debate on value initiated by himself and Napoleoni,<sup>48</sup> which came to conclusions close to those of the value-form theorists. In the Anglophone discussions, where hardly anything from the German debates was translated until the late seventies, Rubin took on a primary importance.<sup>49</sup> In the *Conference of Socialist Economists*, a central forum for these debates, a major argument was that between a Rubin-inspired abstract social labour theory of value and a more traditionalist embodied labour theory of value. Those in the former camp moved in the direction of a monetary theory of value, as in the German debates, but there was far less discussion of and appreciation of the relevance of Hegel’s *Logic* for understanding the systematic relation of the categories in *Capital*.<sup>50</sup> In the absence of a translation of Reichelt and Backhaus, the anglophone few who followed the Germans in wishing to reconstruct *Capital*<sup>51</sup> – the Konstanz-Sydney school, identified as a “value-form school” – were seen by most other participants as overly extreme. It is a feature of systematic dialectic as it has emerged recently that such suggestions of a need for a more radical reconstruction are now at the core of the discussion.

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<sup>45</sup> Michael Heinrich, ‘Invaders from Marx: On the Uses of Marxian Theory, and the Difficulties of a Contemporary Reading’, *Left Curve* 31 (2007)

<sup>46</sup> Jacques Rancière, ‘Le Concept de Critique et la Critique de l’Économie Politique des Manuscrits de 1844 au Capital’, in Althusser et al, *Lire le Capital* (RUF 1996), p. 128. English translation: ‘The concept of ‘critique’ and the ‘critique of political economy’ in *Ideology, Method and Marx*, edited by Ali Rattansi. p 114

<sup>47</sup> Lucio Colletti, *Marxism and Hegel* (Verso 1979), p 281.

<sup>48</sup> See Riccardo Bellofiore, ‘The Value of Labour Value: the Italian Debate on Marx, 1968-1976’ in the special English edition of *Rivista di Politica Economica* IV-4-5V (April-May 1999).

<sup>49</sup> Yet, surprisingly, the importance of Rubin was underestimated in the German debates. The *Essays* were only translated into German (from the English) in 1973, and they left out the first chapter on fetishism. See DD, ‘Sachliche Vermittlung und soziale Form. I.I. Rubins Rekonstruktion der marxischen Theorie des Warenfetischismus’ in the forthcoming *Kritik der politischen Philosophie Eigentum, Gesellschaftsvertrag, Staat II*

<sup>50</sup> A notable exception was the pioneering essay by Jairus Banaji: ‘From the Commodity to Capital: Hegel’s Dialectic in Marx’s Capital,’ in Diane Elson, ed., *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capitalism* (CSE Books 1979).

<sup>51</sup> e.g.: Michael Eldred, *Critique of Competitive Freedom and the Bourgeois-Democratic State: Outline of a Form-Analytic Extension of Marx’s Uncompleted System* (Kurasje 1984).

## The (Anti-)Politics of Value Theory

The critical import of value-form theory is that it calls into question any political conception based on the affirmation of the proletariat as producer of value. It recognises Marx's work as an essentially negative *critique* of capitalist society. In reconstructing the Marxian dialectic of the value-form, it demonstrates how the social life process is subsumed under – or “form-determined” by – the value-form. What characterises such “form-determination” is a perverse priority of the form over its content. Labour does not simply pre-exist its objectification in the capitalist commodity as a positive ground to be liberated in socialism or communism through the alteration of its formal expression. Rather, in a fundamental sense value – as the primary social mediation – pre-exists and thus has a priority over labour. As Chris Arthur argues:

At the deepest level, the failure of the tradition that uses the model of “simple commodity production”, is that it focuses on the human individual as the originator of value relationships, rather than viewing human activities as objectively inscribed within the value form... In truth, however, the law of value is imposed on people through the effectivity of a system with capital at its heart, capital that subordinates commodity production is the aim of valorisation and it is the real subject (identified as such by Marx) confronting us.<sup>52</sup>

While it seems true and politically effective<sup>53</sup> to say that we produce capital by our labour, it is actually more accurate to say (in a world that really is topsy turvy) that we, as subjects of labour, are produced by capital. Socially necessary labour time is the measure of value *only because the value-form posits labour as its content*. In a society no longer dominated by alienated social forms – no longer orientated around the self-expansion of abstract wealth – the compulsion to labour which characterises the capitalist mode of production will disappear.<sup>54</sup> With value, abstract labour disappears as a category. The reproduction of individuals and their needs becomes an end in itself. Without the categories of value, abstract labour and the wage, “labour” would cease to have its systematic role as determined by the primary social mediation: value.

This is why value-form theory points, in terms of the notion of revolution that follows from it, in the same direction as communisation. The overcoming of capitalist social relations cannot involve a simple “liberation of labour”; rather, the only “way out” is the suppression of value itself – of the value-form which posits abstract labour as the measure of wealth. Communisation is the destruction of the commodity-form and the simultaneous establishment of immediate social relations between individuals. Value, understood as a total form of social mediation, cannot be got rid of by halves.

The fact that few value-form theorists have explicitly drawn such radical political conclusions from their work is neither here nor there: such radical political (or anti-political) conclusions are for us the logical implications of the analysis.

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<sup>52</sup> Chris Arthur, ‘Engels, Logic and History’ in Riccardo Bellofiori, ed., *Marxian Economics a Reappraisal: Essays on Volume III of Capital, vol. 1* (Macmillan 1998), p. 14.

<sup>53</sup> Mike Rooke for example criticises Chris Arthur and the systematic dialectic approach for ‘reifying the dialectic’ and losing its meaning as a ‘dialectic of labour’. ‘Marxism, Value and the Dialectic of Labour,’ *Critique* Vol. 37, No. 2, May 2009, pp. 201-216.

<sup>54</sup> Outside of class society ‘labour’ – the human need to interchange with nature (‘man’s inorganic body... with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die’ [EPM]) is not an external compulsion but an expression of one’s own nature. Determination by oneself in the sense, for example, of having to do things to eat, is not compulsion.



## A Return to Marx?

Value-form theory's recognition of the "hidden kernel" of Marx's critique of political economy would suggest that already in 1867 Marx had grasped value as a totalising form of social mediation which had to be overcome as a whole. Thus Marxism, with its history of affirmation of labour and identification with state-led "socialist accumulation", could be seen as a history of the misinterpretation of Marx. The correct reading, which points towards a radical negation of value, has on this view somehow been missed. However, if Marx's theory of the value-form implied communisation in the modern sense then it was an implication that he clearly missed himself!

Indeed Marx's own attitude towards the importance of his value theory was ambivalent. On the one hand Marx insisted on its "scientific" importance, but in response to the difficulties his readers had in grasping its subtleties he seemed willing to compromise over it for the benefit of the reception of the rest of his work.<sup>55</sup> As well as being willing to popularize his work and "hide his method," he allowed Engels (who as we have seen was one of the people who had difficulty with this aspect of his friend's work) to write various reviews which downplayed the treatment of value and money so it wouldn't "detract from the main topic." It seems Marx had the position that:

[T]he value theory is the logical prerequisite of his theory of capitalist production, but is not indispensable for understanding what this latter theory means, and especially, what the critique is of capitalist production. The Marxist discussion in recent years has adopted this apparent Marxian attitude (cf. also Marx's advice to Mrs. Kugelmann)<sup>56</sup> in every way by setting up the problem of whether the Marxian value theory is necessary for the Marxian theory of class exploitation.<sup>57</sup>

Marx seemed to accept that a more or less left-Ricardian reading of his work would be adequate for the needs of the workers' movement. His political writings assumed that a powerful working class, rallying around an increasingly homogeneous workers' identity, would through its unions and its parties simply extend its day-to-day struggles into a revolutionary overthrow of capitalist society. Against the Lassallian social democratic Marxism of his day, Marx did write the scathing *Critique of the Gotha Programme* in which he strongly attacked its labour-affirming and incoherent political economic assumptions. However he didn't feel it necessary to publish it. Moreover the ideas he put forward even in the *Critique* (which was later published by Engels) are by no means unproblematic. They include a theory of transition in which bourgeois right in distribution would still prevail, through the use of labour notes, and in which his description of the "first stage of socialism" is far closer to capitalism than it is to the more attractive second stage, with no mechanism given to explain how the one can change into the other.<sup>58</sup>

It would be wrong to suggest that the German discussion ignored the disjunction between the radical stance that many of them were deriving or developing from Marx's critique, and Marx's own politics. In the late seventies an important way in

<sup>55</sup> For a discussion (drawing on Backhaus) see Michael Eldred, Preface to *Critique of Competitive Freedom and the Bourgeois-Democratic State* (Kurasje 1984), xlv-li.

<sup>56</sup> Marx advised that his friend's wife could, because of its difficulty, skip the first part of *Capital* (on value and money) – Eldred refers here to the fact that many readers of Marx such as those persuaded by Sraffa and Althusser think that this is the right way to approach Marx.

<sup>57</sup> Michael Eldred, *Ibid.* pp. xlix-l.

<sup>58</sup> See R.N. Berki, *Insight and Vision: The Problem of Communism in Marx's Thought* (JM Dent 1984) chapter 5.

which this issue began to be understood was in terms of a difference between an “esoteric Marx” with a radical critique of value as a form of totalising social mediation, and an “exoteric Marx” with an orientation to, and support for, the aims of the workers’ movement of his time.<sup>59</sup> The exoteric Marx was taken to be based on a misreading of the 19th century proletariat’s radical potential. One strong tendency in the German context became to jettison the “exoteric Marx” in favour of the “esoteric Marx.” Marx’s idea of capital as an unconscious automatic subject was seen to displace the idea, which he also seems to have had, of the proletariat as the subject of history. Class struggle is not denied on this view, but seen as “system-immanent” – moving within the categories – and the abolition of the categories is looked for elsewhere. Marx on this view was simply wrong to identify with the workers’ movement, which hindsight has shown us was a movement for emancipation within capitalist society, and not the movement to abolish that society. This tendency is exemplified by the “value-critique” groups *Krisis* and *Exit*. Though he does not use the esoteric/exoteric distinction, Moishe Postone, who developed his ideas in Frankfurt in the early seventies, essentially argues for the same kind of position. In *Time, Labor and Social Domination* he sees Marx as offering a “critique of labour in capitalism” (the esoteric Marx) rather than – as in traditional Marxism – a “critique from the point of view of labour” (the exoteric Marx). It is interesting that apart from this turn away from class, Postone is more explicit than most academic value-form Marxists in drawing conclusions from his theory which in political terms put him on the ‘ultra-left’ or even resonate with the communisation thesis.<sup>60</sup>

By no means all those influenced by the *New Marx Reading*, and certainly not all those within the broader area of a critical value-form oriented Marxism, take this turn away from the class struggle. In Anglophone discussions the adoption of a “monetary” or “abstract social labour” theory of value has in general not involved the same rejection of class analysis, but then it has also not involved the same critique of traditional leftist assumptions that emerged in Germany. Werner Bonefeld however, who has done more than most to introduce critical conceptions derived from the German discussions into Anglophone Marxism, does take a resolutely pro-class struggle perspective.<sup>61</sup> Nonetheless, most accounts of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* understand one of its main characteristics to be a rejection of Marx’s attribution of an historical mission to the proletariat, and a sensibility of scepticism towards the class struggle has been prevalent on the German left. But if in this type of view the proletariat is rejected as an agency of revolution then the question becomes of course – where will the abolition of class society come from? The somewhat unsatisfactory answer prevalent in various forms in German discussions seems to be that it is a matter of having the right critique – that is, in seeing the revolution as a matter of acquiring the correct consciousness. In this focus on correct consciousness and critique, it seems that

<sup>59</sup> Though it may well derive from Backhaus, according to van der Linden the distinction was coined by Stefan Breuer in ‘Krise der Revolutionstheorie’ (1977). Marcel van der Linden, ‘The Historical Limit of Workers’ Protest: Moishe Postone, *Krisis* and the “Commodity Logic”,’ *Review of Social History*, vol. 42 no. 3 (December 1997), pp. 447-458.

<sup>60</sup> Like Dauvé, Postone takes the ‘Fragment on Machines’ to undermine traditional Marxist conceptions of socialism; he sees traditional Marxism as a Ricardian Marxism which sought the self-realisation of the proletariat rather than – as in Marx – its self-abolition, he grasps the USSR as having been capitalist, and like *TC* he emphasises the historical constitution of both objectivity and subjectivity. However when it comes to practical positions in the present he orientates towards reforms, stating significantly that his analysis ‘does not mean that I am an ultra.’ Moishe Postone and Timothy Brennan, ‘Labor and the Logic of Abstraction: an interview’ *South Atlantic Quarterly* 108:2 (2009) p. 319.

<sup>61</sup> See e.g. Werner Bonefeld, ‘On Postone’s Courageous but Unsuccessful Attempt to Banish the Class Antagonism’ *Historical Materialism* 12.3 (2004).

ironically – for all the questioning of traditional Marxism – a certain Leninist problematic separating educator and educated is retained.

We have emphasised the way in which the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* marked a development from and improvement on the Frankfurt School. Adorno's dialectical theory of society – in terms of its systemic self-reproduction behind the backs of individuals, of the inversion of subject-object, and the existence of real abstraction – was derived from Marx's critique of political economy. However Adorno did not himself conduct a detailed study of *Capital* and its drafts, relying to a great extent on others' research.<sup>62</sup> The *Neue Marx-Lektüre* demonstrated the correctness of Adorno's understanding of capitalist society, not in the general area of philosophy and social theory, but on traditional Marxism's chosen terrain of the interpretation of *Capital*. Yet Adorno and Horkheimer seemed unable to follow the theoretical developments being made by their students.<sup>63</sup> After their death the legacy of the Frankfurt School suffered a complete degeneration into bourgeois theory under Habermas, while the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* fed into a flourishing of critical Marxian theory.

Nonetheless there is a way in which the achievements of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* can be seen to fall beneath Adorno. The category of class plays little role in the writings of Backhaus and Reichelt and they treat the question of revolution as outside their field of academic expertise, and thus it is ironically Adorno, even with his idea of the integration of the proletariat, who has more to say on these subjects. Antagonism as a concept features prominently in his writings and is meant in a very orthodox sense of class antagonism. In essays such as *Society* (1965), *Remarks on social conflict today* (1968) and *Late capitalism or industrial society?* (1968) Adorno reveals an "orthodox" (in a good sense) concern for the reality of class antagonism and exploitation. In "Remarks", written with Ursula Jaerisch, he attacks the notion of social conflict as a "positivistic" flattening of Marx's concept of class struggle, though one objectively made possible by the development of class society (integration). Though not being fought out consciously, class antagonism is still at the very heart of contemporary society according to Adorno. This is brought out in the notes to a lecture by Adorno that Backhaus acknowledges as inspiring the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*. Adorno repeatedly stresses here that the "exchange relation is pre-formed (*präformiert*) by the class relation"; the only reason why the worker accepts given relations is that he has "nothing but his labour-power" to sell. Unlike Backhaus' own writings, Adorno's focus is very much on the fact that while exchange is no mere illusion, "it is in the concept of surplus value that the semblance (*Schein*) of the process of exchange is to be found."<sup>64</sup> Thus while Backhaus and Reichelt delved much deeper into Marx's writings, in a certain sense Adorno was less "academic", more "political", and closer to Marx's concern with exploitation and class antagonism.

In this respect too, Krahl was totally different to his inheritors. As the full title of his posthumously published writings<sup>65</sup> indicates, Krahl had the merit not only of being interested in the mediation of the value categories and class struggle but also of taking an eminently historical perspective, one which is largely missing from the

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<sup>62</sup> As well as the work of Lukács and Sohn-Rethel, Adorno was indebted to Alfred Schmidt for all the Grundrisse quotes that he uses in *Negative Dialectics*. See Michael Eldred and Mike Roth, Translators Introduction to 'Dialectics of the Value-Form' in *Thesis Eleven* no. 1 (1980) p. 96.

<sup>63</sup> See Helmut Reichelt 'From the Frankfurt School to Value-Form Analysis' *Thesis Eleven* no. 4 (1982) p. 166.

<sup>64</sup> Backhaus' notes from a 1962 lecture by Adorno are included as an Appendix to *Dialektik der Wertform* (ca ira 1997).

<sup>65</sup> *Constitution and Class Struggle: On the historical dialectic of bourgeois revolution and proletarian emancipation* (Verlag Neue Kritik 2008).

essentially philological works of Reichelt and Backhaus. After Krahl a concern for systemic reconstruction displaces all concern for history in the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*. The move of Backhaus, Reichelt and the next generation of value theorists like Heinrich has been to expel from Marx's work everything that smells of an 'unscientific' philosophy of history or theory of revolution. The issue is not to seek out some kind of mechanical application of the theory but to recognize that the problems that Adorno and Krahl gave different answers to have not gone away. System must be grasped historically and history systematically.

As opposed to any simplistic return to the position of Adorno (or for that matter the untranslated writings of Krahl), the point is to grasp Adorno's pessimistic attitude to the possibilities of class struggle of his day as an attempt at an honest facing up to the contradictions and impasses of his period, rather than a mere failing on his part. Similarly the retreat from the questions of Krahl, the scepticism in German discussions about "class struggle Marxism", and the attempt to ground a revolutionary theory in some other way are not mere ideological aberrations. If they have not seemed to arrive at a convincing alternative they have at least identified a real problem. It is not obvious from the historical record that the workers' movement points in the direction of communism understood as the end of value, class, the state etc. – indeed quite the reverse. The argument that class struggle is system-immanent captures the "trapped" character of struggles within capital. The idea of the esoteric and exoteric Marx – the wish to decouple Marxian critique from the class struggle – appears, no matter how heretical, to offer a plausible solution to the problem of the failure of the working class to perform its "historic task": through the idea that the workers' movement was *never* really revolutionary in itself, and that the really revolutionary perspective lay simply in Marx's "esoteric" vision. Yet of course such a decoupling would leave us with no plausible alternative scenario for the realisation of this vision.

It is clear that the theory of value and class-analysis cannot ultimately be separated. The categories of value and class are mutually implicated. By understanding capital as operating in terms of a "systematic dialectic"<sup>66</sup> and that value relations are a product of the separation of living labour from objectified labour, that is of class. But although it must therefore be ultimately futile to look for the abolition of value anywhere else than in the class that is forced to produce it, and which is increasingly made redundant by it, the doubts about the revolutionary potential of the working class that are harboured by many of the value-critics have to be confronted. It seems to us that *Théorie Communiste* do this.

At the heart of *TC*'s theory is the recognition of the reciprocal implication or mutual involvement of proletariat and capital. The fundamental question that this poses is that of how the struggle of a class that is a class of capitalist society can abolish that society. Part of the importance of the contribution of *TC* is to have resisted answering this by attributing a revolutionary human essence to the proletariat, beneath its merely class and capitalist nature, while at the same time not losing the centrality of the class contradiction. Their answer is rather to grasp the class relation as developing historically through cycles of struggle, while always involving a systematic implication. Crucially for *TC* "communisation" is not what communism and the revolution "always really was or as it always should have been."<sup>67</sup> Rather, the concept of communisation emerges historically with the end of a cycle of struggle in which communism and revolution appeared as something else.

<sup>66</sup> See 'The Moving Contradiction' below.

<sup>67</sup> *Théorie Communiste*, 'Much Ado About Nothing' *Endnotes* no.1 (2008), p. 192.

For *TC* the classical workers' movement from Marx through the 2nd and 3rd Internationals was part of a cycle of struggle which they term programmatism.<sup>68</sup> In this period workers' struggles and the vision of the overcoming of capitalism that emerged from them was based on an autonomy and positivity that workers were able to maintain within the capital-labour relation. The revolution of this period could be described as the impossible attempt to abolish a relation by affirming one of its poles. The tragedies of social democracy and Stalinism, and anarchism's experience in Spain, were the product of the contradictions of the goal and methods set by the movement in its high period, which in turn were a product of the configuration of the class relation at that time – i.e. of the way that capital and class confronted each other. François Danel sums up the situation in the following passage:

Since the development of the capitalist relation – that is to say of the struggle of its classes – did not immediately bring the abolition but the generalisation of wage-labour, the proletariat abstracted the final goal from the movement and made the revolution – its seizure of power – depend on the maturation of conditions both objective (the development of the productive forces) and subjective (its will and its class consciousness). It thus posed communism as a programme and its full achievement as the ultimate term of an impossible transition: the proletarian repossession and mastery of the movement of value, wage-labour supposedly “withering away” from the moment that one replaced money with the labour note. [...] What the workers' movement thus called into question was not capital as mode of production, but only the management of production by the bourgeoisie. It was either a question of workers seizing the productive apparatus from this parasitic class and of destroying its State in order to rebuild another, led by the party as the bearer of consciousness, or else of undermining the power of the bourgeois State by organising production themselves from the bottom up, through the organ of the trade unions or councils. But there was never a question or an attempt of abolishing the law of value – the compulsion towards accumulation and thus towards the reproduction of exploitation which materialises itself at the same time in machinery, in fixed capital as capital in itself, and in the necessary existence, facing the working class, of an exploiting class, bourgeois or bureaucratic, as the collective agent of that reproduction.<sup>69</sup>

The determinate failure of this programmatic revolution bequeathed a post-WW2 capitalism where the workers' movement had a certain power within capitalist society but no longer carried its earlier aspect of autonomous revolutionary affirmation. It was this situation that the development of a revolutionary theory had to confront. The struggles which then gave rise to new theoretical production in the 60s and 70s were – whatever the hopes of groups like the SI – not beyond programmatism. Rather, they took on a contradictory character: counter-cultural utopianism and “resistance to work,” issues of everyday life, coinciding with – and in many ways depending upon – the strength of a more programmatic movement. It was in this contradiction and these struggles that the theory of communisation and the new critical Marxism could arise. The resolution of these struggles in capital's favour marked the end of that cycle in a restructuring in which the class's possibilities of a positive autonomy and affirmation within capitalism would be suppressed. It is for *TC* exactly this defeat that creates a new configuration of the class relation in which the existence of the class is no longer experienced as a positivity to affirm but as an external constraint in the form of capital. And it is this configuration which

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<sup>68</sup> This is the major concept at stake in the debate between Dauvé and *TC* in *Endnotes* no.1.

<sup>69</sup> François Danel, Introduction to *Rupture dans la théorie de la révolution: Textes 1965-1975* (Senonero 2003)

necessitates both a new understanding of communism and a new reading of Marx.

It is possible to interpret this “return to Marx” in terms of an ebb and flow of communist theory to parallel that of revolutionary waves: 1917, 1968 etc. But, just as the perspective of communisation did not emerge even in the marginal heretical tendencies of the earlier revolutionary period, neither did earlier critical Marxisms go as far as those that emerged from the sixties. Lukács, Rubin and Pashukanis developed their conceptions in relation to an ascendant workers’ movement expressing a certain configuration of the capital-labour relation. The work of the earlier critical Marxists, as well as that of Marx – the first value-form theorist – had contradictions and limitations which the later generation, writing as programmatism was coming to an end, were able to go beyond.<sup>70</sup> In the earlier period, while the affirmative proletarian project of programmatism was necessarily a failure not only from our perspective of communisation, but even – and this is important – in terms of the goals it set itself, it nevertheless gave the contradiction of capital and labour “room to move.” By the late sixties that room was being exhausted. For the theorists of the “second revolutionary wave” of the 20th century, one issue that was plainly at stake was a rejection of the idea and practice of socialism as that of workers receiving the true value of their labour in a planned economy.

The critical reading of Marx grasps the radicality of what the revolutionary negation of value involves: we are speaking as much of the overcoming of our own selves as of something “out there.” The contribution of TC is to grasp how and why the configuration of the contradiction between capital and labour in an earlier period did not pose such an overcoming. In Marx’s day, and during the historical workers’ movement, the relation of capital and proletariat posed revolution in terms of the affirmation rather than the negation of labour, value and class. The work of *TC* suggests that the radical “way out” implied by value-form theory may be determined by the historical evolution of the capital-labour relation itself, rather than being the product of an ahistorically correct consciousness, free-floating scientific point of view or perspective of critique. The historical perspective on the class relation complements value-form theory. And the sophisticated analysis of capitalist social relations in systematic dialectic and value-form theory can inform the perspective of communisation by offering an elaboration of what exactly this class relation *is*, and how the particular social relations of capitalist society are form-determined as such. Systematic dialectic and value-form theory can help us to understand the character of the capitalist class relation, i.e. what it is exactly that can have a history in which revolution previously presented itself in the form of programmatism, and whose adequate horizon of supersession is now communisation. Communism necessitates the abolition of a multifaceted relation that has evolved over time, but to abolish it simply means that we cease to constitute value, and it ceases to constitute us. The radicality of our own period is that this is now the only way we can conceive it.

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<sup>70</sup> For example, despite the way Rubin prefigures or directly inspires much later value-form theory, some of his categories such as a trans-historical category of ‘physiologically equal labour’ and that of ‘socially equated labour’ as the basis of socialism can be seen as an expression of the way revolution was posed in the period and the situation of state planner he found himself in. If most present day value-form theorists do not explicitly repudiate a programmatic conception of revolution, there is nonetheless a much bigger move away from the affirmation of labour than in the earlier critical Marxism. The ‘revolutionary’ implications of value-form theory are only drawn out when the development of the class struggle – that is of capitalism – allows this.