

The Path of Negative Totality: From The Critique of Political Economy to a New Reading of the Critical Theory of The Negative Totality of Capitalist Society

Chris O’Kane

Department of Economics, John Jay, CUNY

theresonlyonechrisokane@gmail.com

Introduction

1984 marked the publication of Martin Jay’s *Marxism and Totality*, a magisterial intellectual history of the rise and eclipse of Western Hegelian-Marxism’s principle category of social and political theory: social totality. As Jay shows, between the late 1960s and the early 1980s the latter had come into “strong disrepute”¹ amongst prominent critical theorists.² Louis Althusser and Jurgen Habermas had formulated surprisingly similar criticisms of “expressive” totality’s reductive model of society which eschewed social and political complexity due to its monocausal reliance on “Hegelian-Marxist” philosophical anthropology³ This critique was echoed, and even amplified, by “the challenge of post-structuralism.”⁴

1 Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, p. 514

2 I intentionally follow the convention of using critical theory to characterize a variety of approaches in continental social and political thought. In contrast, I use Critical Theory in a narrow sense to refer to the heterodox Marxian approach to social and political thought developed by the early Frankfurt School and elaborated by the thinkers discussed in this chapter. In do so to mark the important distinctions between critical theory and Critical Theory I discuss in what follows.

3 Habermas’s critique of this notion of Hegelian-Marxist philosophical anthropology is put forward in his critique of the production paradigm. (see *The Philosophical Discourses of Modernity*). Althusser’s in his critique of humanism and of the Hegelian-Marxist notion of expressive totality (Lukacs and humanist marxism) see Louis Althusser, *For Marx and Reading Capital especially p 204*

4 Jay treats this challenge as so substantive that the epilogue (510-537) bears its name.

These criticisms formed the bases of the social and political theories that dominated critical theory in the coming decades. Althusser developed a structural anti-humanist and transhistorical model of totality premised on “structural causality in a complex whole,”⁵ which informed a notion of a “communism” still beset by ideology and structural dominance.⁶

Habermas formulated a social theory of the progressive differentiation of the system (the state and the economy) and the lifeworld (the realm of communicative reason). For Habermas, the former were neutral entities that had nonetheless colonized the latter. His theory of communicative action advocated the decolonization of the lifeworld via the establishment of a democratic relationship of equilibrium between these different spheres incumbent on rational deliberation.⁷ Finally, difference and non-totalizing frameworks became the standpoint of post-structuralist theories of resistance to diffuse discourses of power. Laclau and Mouffe’s, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, for instance, replaced Althusser’s “decentered” totality with decentered discourses. Antagonisms were no longer determined in the last instance by the class antagonism, but by particular differentiated discourses of power. Hence, over this period of time, within these “critical theoretical” discourses, Hegelian-Marxism, and with it totality, were proclaimed to be if not entirely dead, than certainly maligned and mangy dogs.

The 2008 financial crisis led to a reversal of fortunes in critical theory. For the sequence of events that followed -- the economic crisis, state intervention, austerity, and the rise of right-wing authoritarianism-- has called the prescience of Althusser, Habermas, and Laclau and Mouffe’s theories of complex differentiation into question. In contrast these

5 As Althusser elaborates, such a totality, is “constituted by a certain type of complexity, the unity of a structured whole” contains “what can be called levels or instances (such as the state, ISA’s and ideological interpellation) which are distinct and “relatively autonomous”, and co-exist within this complex structural unity” they are “articulated with one another according to specific determinations” that are “fixed in the last instance by the level or instance of the economy.” CITE

6 See Jay, chapter 13. Find Althusser citation from Pantiagos article

7 See in particular, Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Volume 1 and 2.

developments have signaled the validity of theories that criticise the miserable the reproduction of capitalist society as a process that encompasses the economy, state and civil society from the perspective of its overcoming.

This has led to the unprecedented popularity of a subterranean strand of Critical Marxist theory that has developed a “New Reading”⁸ of the critique of political economy as a critical theory of abstract social domination. In this “New Reading”, totality is not grasped as an “expressive totality.” So it does not fall prey to Habermas and Althusser’s criticisms. At the same time, this New Reading of totality does not aspire to sociological “complexity.” So it does not suffer from the ensuing shortcomings of Althusser, Habermas, Laclau and Mouffes social and political theory.⁹ In contrast, this new critical-theoretical reading grasps totality as critical and negative concept. On this basis, totality is utilized to illuminate the constitution and reproduction of the autonomous, inverted and dominating subjective-objective dynamic of capitalist society for the purpose of its negation by substantiating how its differentiated parts are implicated in this wholistic, historically-specific, process.

Approach

This chapter will assay this critical conception of negative totality by critically mapping its development. It will focus on what I take to be the

8 Although the term “New Reading” is often used to characterize the array of approaches found within the Neue Marx Lektüre and/or “value-form theory”, (see Pitts) in what follows I use the term New Reading to refer to the New Readings of Marx within the former and the latter that are concerned with elaborating the heterodox reading of the critique of political economy as a critical social theory, initially developed by the Frankfurt School.

9 For as Simon Clarke, Alfred Schmidt, Helmut Reichelt have shown, Althusser, Habermas’s respective theorizations of political mediation between the differentiated spheres of production, distribution, governance and civil society separate, transhistoricize, and neutralize the differentiated yet interrelated spheres of capitalist totality failing to grasp its historically-specific dynamic of social domination. Christian Lotz and Choat and Rekret show that the same is true for Laclau and Mouffe in regard to their notion of hegemony and differentiated discourses

most important roadmarks in the development of this notion of totality: Marx's Critique of Political Economy, Lukacs's *History and Class Consciousness*, Adorno's critical theory of negative totality, Backhaus and Reichelt's New Reading of Marx, Moishe Postone's *Time, Labor and Social Domination* and Werner Bonefeld's *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy*. My critical approach entails interrogating these respective formulations of totality on the basis of their ability to elucidate the critique of the constitution and reproduction of the negative totality of capitalist society from the perspective of its overcoming. This means I will take a certain underlying methodological and analytical approach. Rather than using the procedure of reconstruction to reveal that a single thinker has formulated a hidden-yet-adequate theory of the critique of negative social totality, I interpret the evolution of this strand of marxian critical social theory, from the perspective of the development of negative totality.

Towards this end, I distinguish between three critiques of negative totality:

- (1) The Critique of the Negative Totality of the Capitalist Social Form of Production
- (2) The Critique of the Negative Totality of Capitalist Political Economy
- (3) The Critique of the Negative Totality of Capitalist Society¹⁰

and several phases of development:

(I) Negative Totality in The Critique of Political Economy,

¹⁰ As I explain below in more detail the Critique of the Negative Totality of the Capitalist Social Form of Production concerns the separate but united elements of production, circulation, and reproduction that *Capital* focuses on; the Critique of the Negative totality of Capitalist Political Economy on how social relations constitute the differentiated yet reciprocal realms of the capitalist state and capitalist economy, which in turn reproduce these relations; the Critique of the Negative Totality of Capitalist Society concerns how the peculiar social relations of the capitalist metabolic interaction with nature are constituted and reproduced through the reciprocal subjective objective interaction of social relations in the different yet related domains of capitalist society, such as the economy and state, but also civil society.

(II) The Critique of the Social Totality of Capitalist Society in Western Marxism

(III) The New Reading of the Critique of the Negative Totality of the Capitalist Social Form of Production

(IV) The New Reading of The Critique of the Negative Totality of Capitalist Political Economy.

I close by pointing towards a new phase in the development of this critical notion of totality: The New Reading of the Critique of the Negative Totality of Capitalist Society. Consequently, this chapter provides an overview of the historical development of this critical and negative conception of social totality and points to its further development.¹¹

Argument

From this vantage point my critical mapping of the path of the critique of negative conception of social totality runs as follows: In Part One I examine totality in the critique of political economy. Here I argue that type of totality that is the object of the latter is ambiguous and incomplete since the extant manuscripts of the critique of political economy point towards a critique of

- (1)the negative social totality of capitalist society
- (2)the negative totality of capitalist political economy
- (3)the negative totality of the capitalist social form of production.

I ultimately argue that Marx focused on the latter. Yet I also make the case that the fulcrum of this critique was likewise ambiguous. For, as I show, the extant manuscripts from the critique of political economy can be seen as critiquing

¹¹ I also aim to point to its contemporary relevance for a general readership understandably lacking expertise in technical or abstruse matters of “marxology.”

- (1) the constitution and reproduction of the negative totality of the capitalist social form of production from the perspective of the metabolic interaction with nature
- (2) the constitution of the negative totality of the capitalist social form of production from the standpoint of labour
- (3) the reproduction of the negative totality of the capitalist social form of production by the exchange mediation of labour.

In Part Two I turn to two Western Hegelian-Marxist critiques of the totality of capitalist society that have proven to be the most influential in the development of this critique of negative totality. I first show how Lukacs's 'aspirational' notion of social totality drew on Marx's critique of the constitution of the negative totality of the capitalist social form of production from the standpoint of labour to formulate a critique of capitalist social totality from the standpoint of labour on a Traditional Marxist footing. I then move to show how Adorno's notion of the exchange abstraction expands the critique of the reproduction of the negative totality of the capitalist social form of production via the exchange mediation of labour to the negative totality of capitalist society.

In Part Three, I move to assess the New Reading of Marx as New Readings of the Critique of the Negative Totality of the Social Form of Capitalist Production. I first show how Backhaus and Reichelt's value-form theoretical interpretation of Marx's monetary theory of value intended to address the gaps in Adorno's account of exchange mediation by demonstrating how the reproduction of the totality of the capitalist social form of production is subordinated to the forms of value. I then demonstrate how Postone's notion of the internal contradiction between concrete and abstract labour in "comprehensive" totality criticized and transformed Lukacs's notion of totality to offer a critique of the

constitution of the totality of the capitalist social form of production as a critique of labour.

In Part Four, I demonstrate how Werner Bonefeld's notion of negative totality as "unity in separation" adroitly synthesizes and supplements these New Readings of the negative totality of the capitalist social form of production. I also show how Bonefeld aligns the former with a New Reading of the of the Negative Totality of Capitalist Political Economy.

I close by pointing to ways these New Readings of negative totality can be further developed into a New Reading of the Critique of the Negative Totality of Capitalist Society. This is intended not only to further develop the critique of the compulsive, dominating reproduction of the subjective objective negative totality of capitalist society from the perspective of its overcoming, but in so doing to further point to its relevance in our our miserable times.

I Negative Totality in The Critique of Political Economy

Despite a wealth of important literature that aims at reconstruction,¹² the precise role that totality plays in Marx's critique of political economy¹³ is clouded by several factors. In the first place, despite Engel's and Kautsky's valiant efforts, even the posthumous publications of *Capital* Volume II, Volume III and *the Theories of Surplus Value* assured that only a portion of the Critique of Political Economy was realized.¹⁴ In the

12 Backhaus, Reichelt, and Postone's efforts at the reconstruction of the critique of political economy as a critical social theory will be discussed below. For other approaches to reconstruction see, for instance the work of Chris Arthur, Fred Moseley, Michael Heinrich, Andrew Kliman, and William Clare Roberts.

13 As I hope the ensuing discussion makes clear I conceive of The Critique of Political Economy as entailing *The Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* all three published volumes of *Capital* and, as well as the preparatory manuscripts (the *Grundrisse*, 1861-63 Manuscripts, 1864-65 Manuscripts etc), and other published pieces that summarize the state of his research at the time (*Wage Labour and Capital*).

14 And even then Marx provided four different editions of Volume One and even considered completely revising it.

second place, the intent of this project is rife with ambiguities, not only in regard to its intended scope, but also its approach. Did Marx intend to finish the 6-book plan mentioned in the *Grundrisse* or had he settled on a three or four volume plan?¹⁵ Did *Capital*, as Traditional Marxism holds, intend to provide a marxist political economy premised on a positive notion of totality that disclosed the iron laws of economic development that was intended to impel the worker's movement to seize the state and the means of production, culminating in communism? Or was it a critique of political economy tied to a negative conception of totality that revealed the historically-specific social form of domination in order for the worker's movement to negate this social form? If so, was the critique of political economy intent on offering a critique of the totality of the differentiated yet unified elements of the capitalist social form of production, of capitalist political economy, or of capitalist society? The extant materials of the critique of political economy offer bases for all of these viewpoints. Due to the concerns of this chapter, in the remainder of this section, I focus on the relationship between these three notions of negative social totality and the critique of political economy.¹⁶ I first turn to Marx's fragmentary allusions to the relationship between the negative social totality of capitalist society and the critique of political economy and the negative totality of capitalist political economy and the critique of political economy. Then I move to discussing the critique of the negative totality of the capitalist social form of production.

15 For discussions concerning this and other issues surrounding The Critique of Political Economy, see the edited collections by members of the International Symposium of Marxist Theory (ISMT). For discussions of the intended scope and extent of Marx's project, see, in particular, *Re-reading Marx: New Perspectives after the Critical Edition*.

16 In so doing, I refrain from focusing on issues pertaining to totality that concerns a wealth of literature on this issue, such as the intellectual history of totality before Marx, Hegel's notion of totality, the relationship between Marx and Hegel, the object and methodology of the critique of political economy and the role that these interpretations play in different interpretations of Marx. These issues are too large to address here and thus stand outside of the remit of this chapter. I would recommend those interested in these issues consult the edited volumes of the members of the ISMT (International Symposium of Marxist Theory) and essay collections by its members such as Chris Arthur's *New Dialectic*, Patrick Murray's *Mismeasure of Wealth* and Fred Mosley's *Money and Totality* as well as Riccardo Bellofiore's recent "Marx after Hegel: Capital as Totality and the Centrality of Production" <http://crisiscritique.org/political11/Riccardo%20Bellofiore.pdf>

I.I The Negative Totality of Capitalist Society in The Critique of Political Economy

Marx alludes to the relationship between the negative totality of capitalist society and the critique of political economy at several points in the extant manuscripts of the critique of political economy.¹⁷ His most concise statement comes in a section of the *Grundrisse* that discusses the dominating subjective-objective supraindividual dynamic of the constitution and reproduction of the historically-specific social form of the capitalist metabolism with nature. In Marx's account of the former, "wage labor" had "dissolved" and supplanted landed forms of property "as the ground on which society stands," "permeat[ing] the entire expanse of society."¹⁸ Consequently, "The inner construction of modern society, or, capital in the totality of its relations, is ... posited in the economic relations of modern landed property, which appears as a process: ground rent-capital-wage labor." Although, much of this mirrors, Marx's fragmentary critique of the Trinity Formula (as we shall see below) Marx's also hints at a more expansive notion of the supradividual autonomous dominating subjective objective dynamic of the reproduction of the negative totality of capitalist society in his discussion of "the completed bourgeois system" in which "every economic relation presupposes every other in its bourgeois economic form and everything posited is thus also a presupposition." Accordingly, this "organic system" is that of a social "totality" that exceeds the interrelation between rent-labor and capital "precisely in subordinating all elements of society to itself, or in creating out of it the organs which it still lacks."¹⁹

As these allusions indicate, Marx thus gestured towards a conception of the critique of political economy as a critical theory of the negative social

17 See MECW 34.328

18 P 276

19 Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse*, 278

totality of capitalist society. This critique pointed to elaborating the constitution of the historically-specific capitalist metabolism with nature and its perpetuation via the subordination of social relations in differentiated yet interrelated elements of society to the process of capital accumulation qua social reproduction.

I.II The critique of the Negative Totality of Capitalist Political Economy in The Critique of Political Economy

Elsewhere-- in a discussion of rent in feudalism and capitalism in Volume III, in the section on primitive accumulation, and the working day in Volume I -- Marx offers a striking glimpse at how he conceived of these historically-specific social relations constituting and reproducing the negative totality of capitalist political economy.²⁰ Taken together, these passages indicate that the separate-yet-related spheres of the state and the economy are created by capitalist social relations as supraindividual entities that reciprocally condition each other, as well as individual actions within these spheres, to reproduce capitalist social relations and thus capitalist society.

These allusions to the negative social totality of capitalist society and the negative totality of capitalist political economy would anticipate and influence the development of Marxian critical theory. However, the majority of Marx's extant work on the critique of political economy focuses on the negative totality of the capitalist social form of production with oblique gestures towards how the state as well as other realms of

²⁰ The specific economic form, in which unpaid surplus-labour is pumped out of direct producers, determines the relationship of rulers and ruled, as it grows directly out of production itself and, in turn, reacts upon it as a determining element. Upon this, however, is founded the entire formation of the economic community which grows up out of the production relations themselves, thereby simultaneously its specific political form. It is always the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers – a relation always naturally corresponding to a definite stage in the development of the methods of labour and thereby its social productivity – which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure and with it the political form of the relation of sovereignty and dependence, in short, the corresponding specific form of the state."Karl Marx, Capital Volume Three.

capitalist society are implicated in this process. Yet as I will now show, Marx provides three different bases for this critique of negative totality at different points in *Capital*.

I.III The Trinity Formula and the Critique of the Negative Totality of the Social Form of Capitalist Production in The Critique of Political Economy

The Trinity Formula stands at the beginning of the incomplete concluding section of *the 1864-65 Manuscripts* and as chapter 48 in Volume III. It is likewise fragmentary and was published out of order in the latter.²¹ In what exists of this section, however, Marx's critique of the negative totality of the capitalist social form of production finds its most concrete expression.

Marx substantiates this conception of totality by first revisiting his account of totality viz the historically-specific capitalist metabolism with nature. Yet here the former is conceived in a more narrow sense than the *Grundrisse*. Negative totality encompasses the "specific social form" of the "capitalist process of production and reproduction," which is realized in the apportionment of land, labour and capital.²²

Marx enumerates the constitution and reproduction of such a totality through a condensed summary of the presuppositions, processes, and results he elucidates across all three volumes of *Capital*.²³ Primitive accumulation is the historical premise of this social form, which is realized in its results: the antagonistic capitalist social division of labour which constitutes the capitalist social form of production, transforming the transhistorical

21 See Michael Heinrich, *Engel's Edition of the Third Volume of Capital and Marx's Manuscript* <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/editorial/heinrich.htm>. See also Fred Moseley's introduction and the editorial apparatus to the recently translated *1864-65 Manuscripts*.

22

23 Karl Marx, *Capital Volume Three*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/ch48.htm>

process of metabolic reproduction into the historically-specific autonomous, inverted, and dominating supra-individual subjective object process of capitalist reproduction. For, by virtue of the separation of producers from the means of production and their “monopolisation by a particular section of society,”²⁴ “the products and conditions of activity of labour-power which have *become autonomous* vis-à-vis this living labour-power and are personified in capital through this antithesis.”²⁵ Consequently, capital becomes an “independent power,”²⁶ compelling individuals as “bearers” of these relations within the interrelated domains of land, labor, and capital to act in everyday life in ways that assures they acquire the respective types of revenue that are apportioned by surplus value in the forms of wages, rent, and profit. As a consequence the historically-specific forms of land, production, circulation, and everyday life are incorporated in “enchanted, perverted, and inverted” reproduction of the totality of the capitalistic social form’s metabolism with nature.

I.IV The Critiques of Fetishism and the Critique of the Negative Totality of the Social Form of Capitalist Production in The Critique of Political Economy

However, this critique of the totality of the capitalist social form of production is eclipsed by two other approaches that predominant in a much more influential section of *Capital*, particularly for the critical notion of negative totality: Part One, section four of Volume One: the Fetish Character of the Commodity and its Secret. In this widely interpreted and justly famous section Marx introduces the ‘secret’ central to his critique of political economy: that the socially objective categories of political

24 Ibid. 888

25 Ibid.888

26 Ibid.

economy are constituted by historically specific capitalist social relations which in turn are dominated by the dynamics of these categories.

As this description of constitution, autonomization, inversion, domination and reproduction indicates, Marx's critical exposition of this process has two points of emphasis:

(1) the constitution of the negative totality of the capitalist social form of production by social labour

(2) the exchange mediated reproduction of said totality.

Both approaches appear in the oft-quoted definition and ensuing exposition of the fetish-character of the commodities.

I.IV. I The Critique of the Social Constitution of the Negative Totality of the Capitalist Social Form of Production from the Standpoint of Labour

The first can be seen when Marx stresses that "What is mysterious about the commodity form is therefore simply that the social characteristics of men's own labor are reflected back to them as objective characteristics inherent in the products of their labor, as quasi-physical properties of these things."²⁷ For, as he enumerates, in the paragraphs that follow this fetish-like character of the world of commodities has its origin in the peculiar social character of the labor which produces them.²⁸

I.IV.II The Critique of the Reproduction of the Negative Totality of the Capitalist Social Form of Production as Mediated by Exchange

²⁷ Karl Marx, Capital Volume 1 translated by Hans Ehrbar, 133

²⁸ Coming as it does at the point of 'simple circulation' in Marx's method of presentation, such a notion of labour remains abstracted from its content, thus leaving the relationship between form and content relatively undetermined. As we shall see, this will lead a very different conceptions of labor viz the constitution of totality by Lukacs and Postone.

Yet the ensuing autonomization of these “things” leads Marx to likewise emphasize the role the exchange of commodities play in the reproduction of such a totality by virtue of their existence “apart from and outside producers.”²⁹ For, in the aforementioned famous passage, Marx also states that “the relations between the producers, in which those social determinations of their labors assert themselves take the form of a social relation between the products of labor.”³⁰ This means that “to the producers therefore, the social relations between their private labors *appear* as what they *are*, i.e., not as direct social relations of persons during their labor processes themselves, but rather as *material relations* of persons and *social relations of things*.”³¹ Consequently, this “production process has the mastery over men, and man does not yet master the production process”³² because “Their own social movement has for them the form of a movement of things—things which, far from being under their control, in fact control them”³³ compelling personified individuals to reproduce the capitalist social form of production.

As can be seen from this admittedly brief overview, Marx does not have one systematic conception of negative totality, but points towards several. Moreover, as I will now show, by first turning to Western Hegelian Marxism and then the New Reading, Marx’s fragmentary and coextensive gestures towards these different critiques of negative totality can be said to have been elaborated by the development of the critique of negative totality.

II The critique of the social totality of capitalist society in Western Marxism

29 Ibid. 134

30 Ibid 133

31 Ibid. 134

32 Ibid 164

33 Ibid 145

II.I Lukacs's Critique of the "Expressive" Totality of Capitalist Society from the Standpoint of Labor

As Indicated, Lukacs' importance in developing the "Western Hegelian-Marxist" conception of totality has been well established by Jay, Althusser, Habermas and others whom credit him with establishing the seminal Hegelian-Marxist notion of "expressive" totality. As I will now show, in more depth, this term refers to the core role that the proletariat plays in Lukacs' critique of capitalist social totality. For "expressive" totality develops Marx's critique of the constitution of the totality of the capitalist social form of production from the standpoint of labour into a critique of the constitution of the social totality of capitalist society on a Traditional (Hegelian) Marxist basis.

Before proceeding to Lukacs's critique of totality it is then necessary to quickly recount the reception of Marx by Traditional Marxism. As Colletti, Elbe, Heinrich, Hoff and others have shown,³⁴ Marx's unfinished and ambiguous body of work was codified by Engels, Kautsky and others into the scientific worldview of Traditional Marxism. This worldview held that *Capital* had deciphered the transhistorical scientific laws of economic development that would culminate in the seizure of the state and the direction of production and exchange by the dictatorship of the proletariat. Lukacs' seminal *History and Class Consciousness* was published at a time when this worldview had come into crisis due to the nationalist sentiments displayed by workers following the outbreak of World War I and the ensuing failure of revolutions in the West in its aftermath. Lukacs's utilization of totality attempted to rejuvenate this worldview on the basis of a Hegelian reading of Marx. Towards this end, Lukacs extended Marx's notion of the critique of the constitution of the

³⁴ See Ingo Elbe, *Between Marx, Marxism and Marxisms*, Michael Heinrich, *The Science of Value*, Jan Hoff, *Marx Worldwide* as well as Lucio Colletti's "Bernstein and the Marxism of the Second International."

totality of the capitalist social form of production to capitalist social totality. He also interpreted social totality from the perspective of worldview marxism by recourse to the iron laws of Hegelian historical development. The proletariat as the unwitting creators of totality would culminate history once they became conscious of its objectified nature, reuniting subject and object via revolutionary means.

To achieve these ends, Lukacs makes several important interpretative moves. The first is his establishment of the dialectical social totality of capitalist society as the core category of Marxism.³⁵ The second is his elucidation of the constitution of said totality. This includes two important methodological interpretations of the critique of political economy

(1) the claim that “the chapter dealing with the fetish character of the commodity contains within itself the whole of historical materialism and the whole self-knowledge of the proletariat seen as the knowledge of capitalist society”. [*Capital I*, Chapter 1, Section 4].³⁶

(2) His ensuing interpretation of commodity fetishism to theorize the creation and revolutionary seizure of capitalist social totality by the proletariat.

As a result, Lukacs’ expressive theorization of totality rests on his selective interpretation and generalization of the aspect of Marx’s definition of the fetish character of commodities that critiques the constitution of the totality of the capitalist social form of production from the standpoint of labour. For, in Lukacs words, “the essence of the commodity-structure” is that

35 See his statement that “concrete totality is the category that governs reality” (10) so that is “only the dialectical conception of totality can enable us to understand *reality as a social process*.” (13) For, “It is by virtue of this insight that the dialectical method and its concept of totality can be seen to provide real knowledge of what goes on in society.” 15 Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*

36 Lukacs, 170

a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity', an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people.³⁷

Moreover, since “the commodity has penetrated all of society and remade it in its image,”³⁸ Lukacs uses this interpretation as the model for his ensuing account of the creation and overcoming of the reified social totality of capitalist society. Part One of *Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat* thus proceeds to establish how a “relation between people takes on the character of thing” possessing “phantom objectivity” within the sphere of production. Here the social division of labour veils comprehension of totality. Consequently, proletarians take a passive stance towards and thus perpetuate an oppressive process they have collectively created. From here, Lukacs’s argument moves to elucidate how this relationship of constitution, mystification and passivity is mirrored in a myriad of other aspects of the totality of capitalist society including the state, bureaucracy, and even journalism. Following Part Two’s exposition of the similar, but epistemological, deficiencies of German philosophy, Part Three turns to “derealization” and the revolutionary seizure of totality. Lukacs’ construal of the relationship between the standpoint of labour and totality is essential to this argument. For he holds that the proletariat’s constitution of totality provides them with a privileged epistemological standpoint that will ultimately see through the all embracing mystifications of “phantom objectivity”, leading them to grasp that they are simultaneously the subjects and the objects of totality. This will lead to their coming to revolutionary consciousness, their seizure, and rule of totality.

Despite its importance, Lukacs’ theory of capitalist social totality possess a number of important theoretical gaps viz the subjective-objective constitution, domination and reproduction of negative totality. In the first place, in simply mirroring proletarian domination, Lukacs does not account for how the domains of the bureaucracy, the state, journalism, etc are enmeshed in a totality that is constituted and reproduced by the proletariat. In the second, despite its status as the subject and object of

37 Lukacs, 83

38 Lukacs, 85

totality, Lukacs's emphasis on the coming to consciousness of the proletariat, leads to a foreshortened account of its dominated subjectivity. Unlike the other actors in capitalist society -- whom are compelled by the natural laws of capitalist accumulation even though do not do directly participate in this process -- proletarians are not dominated, but simply rendered passive; even though they are directly subordinated by the production process. Yet it is important to realize that these very same gaps are essential to his account of the revolutionary seizure of totality, positively construed. For if the proletariat is the sole creator of totality whose subjectivity is only rendered passive, rather than dominated by its dynamic, than it is simply a matter of coming to consciousness and reuniting with the alienated world it has created. In contrast, if the proletariat is dominated by the overarching forces it collectively perpetuates, in tandem with social relations in the other domains Lukacs refers to, than such a totality is undoubtedly negative rather than expressive and must be overcome rather than seized.³⁹

Nevertheless, Lukacs's notion of "expressive" totality would prove influential for the development of the Western Marxist critical theoretical conception of social totality. On the one hand, it would follow Lukacs in elucidating capitalist society as a social totality by recourse to respective interpretations of Part One.⁴⁰ On the other hand, it would put forward stringent criticisms of the shortcomings of Lukacs' theory and its historical veracity, centered on this implausible account of the relationship between the proletariat and totality.⁴¹ For, of course, Lukacs' prognoses never came to pass. The 'proletarian' seizure of the Russian state mutated into Stalinist authoritarianism in the East. Whilst in the West all too many proletarians supported fascism or became integrated into mass society rather than coming to consciousness. This led to the reconstrual of the social totality of capitalist society as a negative category by Theodor W Adorno.

39 I develop this criticism in more detail in

40 See, for instance, Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*.

41 See Adorno's comments in *Negative Dialectics*, particularly . For other criticisms of Lukacs's theoretical shortcomings see Elbe, Colletti, Bonefeld and Postone. I summarize the latter below.

II.II Adorno's Critique of the Reproduction of the Negative Totality of Capitalist Society via the Mediation of the Exchange Abstraction

Despite the undoubted influence Lukacs had on his early work, Adorno's critical theory thus grappled with a social totality that had not promulgated a proletarian revolution in the manner Lukacs had anticipated. Rather, theory lived on because the opportunity to realize it had been missed. Consequently, whereas as we have seen Lukacs critiqued expressive totality from the standpoint of its constitution by proletarian labour in order to promulgate its proletarian seizure, Adorno critiqued the reproduction of late capitalist social totality by means of the mediation of the exchange abstraction. Adorno thus followed Lukacs insofar as he held that society was constituted by social labour. However, in contrast to the former, his critical theory of negative totality extrapolated the second approach to critique from Part One of *Capital*. Accordingly, Adorno conceived of totality as a "negative" and "critical category" reproduced by the subjective objective mediation of the exchange abstraction.

Writing at the time of the capitalist "golden age," Adorno thus held that the autonomization, inversion and supraindividual subjective objective domination of "exchange" as a "conceptuality that held sway in reality" was "still the key to society."⁴² But he also pointed to how Fordism and "Keynesian" state bureaucratic policies – such as full employment and military keynesianism – counteracted its crisis tendencies. Consequently, although class antagonism and exploitation persisted, class consciousness had been integrated into mass society. This had not only assured a historically unparalleled standard of living, but also testified to the maiming of subjectivity by this overall dynamic of exchange-mediated reproduction, the "objects" of which were "no longer merely the masses, but also the administrators and their hangers-on." Consequently, due to their reduction to "charactermasks," individuals were reliant upon the very negative processes that dominated. Individuals within these antagonistic social relations were therefore not

42 Theodor W. Adorno, *Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?*

only compelled to reproduce society, but their very subjectivity was shaped by and dependent upon these processes.⁴³ Thus, as a whole,

[T]he economic process, which reduces individual interests to the common denominator of a totality, which remains negative, because it distances itself by means of its constitutive abstraction from the individual interests, out of which it is nevertheless simultaneously composed.... The violence of the self-realizing universal is not, as Hegel thought, identical to the essence of individuals, but always also contrary. They are not merely character-masks, agents of value, in some presumed special sphere of the economy. Even where they think they have escaped the primacy of the economy, all the way down to their psychology, the *maison tolère*, [French: universal home] of what is unknowably individual, they react under the compulsion of the generality; the more identical they are with it, the more un-identical they are with it in turn as defenceless followers. What is expressed in the individuals themselves, is that the whole preserves itself along with them only by and through the antagonism.⁴⁴

Yet because totality was a critical category, Adorno's social theory was less one-dimensional and pessimistic than is often portrayed. By emphasizing the negativity of the whole whilst unveiling its origins in the antagonistic exchange relation, he sought to marshal opposition to its dynamic, in order to negate it. Nonetheless, his theory was not without its theoretical and methodological ambiguities. This is particularly true in regard to this process of substantiating the relationship between the negative social totality of capitalist society and the negative totality of the social form of capitalist production. As Christian Lotz,⁴⁵ Frank Engster⁴⁶ have pointed out, Adorno relied on an undeveloped notion of "simple" exchange that at points is transhistoricized. This undercut an account of the historical specificity of the capitalist social form and with it the negative social totality of capitalist society. In addition, Adorno's

43 For a more thorough reconstruction of Adorno's notion of negative totality see Chris O'Kane, Adorno, Negative Totality, Constellations, forthcoming

44 Theodor W. Adorno, Negative Dialectics, Law and Fairness')
<http://members.efn.org/~dredmond/ND4Trans.txt>

45 Christian Lotz, *The Capitalist Schema*

46 Frank Engster, Das Geld als Mab, mittel und method.

methodological presentation of the links between production, exchange, and reproduction are fragmentary, failing to provide a systematic account of the constitution of the exchange abstraction and well as its mediation of the state and civil society, and thus of the reproduction of the negative social totality of late capitalist society.

Nonetheless, like Lukacs, Adorno's conception of the negative totality of capitalist society reproduced by the mediation of exchange would prove influential in the development of the New Reading of the Negative Totality of the Capitalist Social Form of Production, to which I now turn.

III The New Reading of the Negative Totality of the Capitalist Social Form of Production

III.I Backhaus and Reichelt's New Reading: The Critique of the Reproduction of the Negative Totality of the Capitalist Social Form of Production by the mediation of value

The Neue Marx Lektüre now consists in large body of heterogeneous scholarship.⁴⁷ However, its primary origins – as well as its name – lie with a number of Adorno's students, most notably Hans-Georg Backhaus and Helmut Reichelt.⁴⁸ As Backhaus and Reichelt would later acknowledge, their New Reading of Marx was not only motivated by their acquisition of a rare first edition of Volume One, but also by what they saw as the respective insights and gaps in Adorno's interpretation of Marx. Although Adorno was 'the only author to have thematised what Marx terms the 'objective illusion' of economic categories',⁴⁹ his critical theory of society was nonetheless hampered by its non-systematic

47 For an overview of its developments and debates see Ingo Elbe, *Marx im Westen* and Hoff.

48 For a more thorough account of the work of Backhaus, Reichelt (as well as Alfred Schmidt) and the development of the Neue Marx Lektüre in regard to Adornian critical theory see Riccardo Bellofiore and Tommaso Redolfi Riva, *the Neue Marx Lektüre*, and Hans-Georg Backhaus in Best, Bonefeld, O'Kane (ed) *The Sage Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, Ingo Elbe, Helmut Reichelt in Best, Bonefeld, O'Kane (ed) *The Sage Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*, and Werner Bonefeld, *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy*, to which I am indebted in what follows. For an account that stresses their discontinuity see Hoff.

49 Hans-Georg Backhaus, *Between Philosophy and Science: Marxian Social Theory as Critical Theory* 1992, p. 87.

exposition of the autonomization and inversion of “exchange.” This undercut the efficacy of his account of the exchange-mediated reproduction of the totality of capitalist society.⁵⁰ From this perspective, Backhaus and Reichelt’s project of reconstructing the “esoteric Marx’s” theory of value⁵¹ can then be seen to have a double-faceted motivation: to uncover Marx’s monetary theory of value in order to sure up Adorno’s utilization of Marx’s notion of exchange and with it his critique of social totality.

Following and supplementing Adorno’s critique of the autonomous, supraindividual and socially objective properties of exchange, Backhaus thus argued that Marx’s monetary theory of value is the logically necessary “perverted”⁵² appearance of the capitalist social form of production. For the functional interconnection of private production in capitalist society and its dual character of labour is necessarily realized in the value form.⁵³

Consequently, as Backhaus’s “On the Dialectic of the Value-Form” succinctly demonstrates

"The proper sense of the "critique of economic categories" consists in demonstrating the social conditions which make the existence of the value-form necessary. "The analysis of the dominant form of labour is simultaneously an analysis of the preconditions of its abolition Marx's categories are negative and at the same time

50 See, for instance, Reichelt’s statement that “Adorno ... assumes that the whole economy is to be developed out of a principle – the exchange principle – although this is not an inherently coherent, purely theoretical construct. As a presentation of the totality, the theory is also a method, which ‘follows the object’ and thereby reconstructs the irrational systematicity of the real system itself. How this process of autonomisation is to be conceptualised in detail is not explained by Adorno: the central concepts – objective abstraction, inversion, autonomisation, totality, power of the universal over the particular – remain postulates with regard to their concretisation as far as the critique of economics is concerned.” Helmut Reichelt, *Marx’s Critique of Economic Categories: Reflections on the Problem of Validity in the Dialectic Presentation of Capital*, *Historical Materialism*, 15 2007 p. 6.

51 Backhaus and Reichelt’s early work argued that an esoteric Marx with a monetary theory of value and dialectical method of presentation could be distinguished and reconstructed from the exoteric Marx of traditional Marxism.

52 Backhaus uses the German term *verrückt* which means mad, displaced, which Bonefeld translates as perverted

53 Marx deduces the concept of ‘social labour’ and discovers a contradiction between this form of labour and the ‘actual’ one that has a private character. This contradiction is considered by Marx to be the reason why ‘labour exhibits itself in value’, or, in other words, the reason for the existence of money. Backhaus, *Dialektik der Wertform*, p. 265. Quoted in Bellofiore and Riva, NML, 31

positive: they delineate a negative state of affairs in the light of its positive dissolution (Aufhebung)"⁵⁴

Reichelt's *Logical Structure* further elucidated how these forms of value mediate the reproduction of such a negative totality. According to Reichelt, Marx's reconstructed dialectic method of presentation elaborates the "increasing autonomisation of exchange value"⁵⁵

Therefore, as Bellofiore and Riva show, Reichelt's elucidation of capital as an autonomous negative totality focuses on Marx's notion of money as the overgrasping and dominant subject [*übergreifendes Subjekt*] of this process, [of reproduction]"⁵⁶ This has the consequence qua negative totality, as Reichelt elsewhere, indicates that:

What is thus constituted is an inverted world, in which sensuousness in its widest sense -- as use-value, labor, 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 labor is step-by-step sucked into this process, in which all activities "are themselves inverted"⁵⁷

Taken together Backhaus and Reichelt's early work can thus be seen to point to an account of the reproduction of the negative totality of the capitalist social form of production on the basis of its mediation by the forms of value via critical recourse to its genesis in the capitalist social form of production. Yet despite their pioneering work in promulgating this New Reading, Backhaus and Reichelt, eventually abandoned their project of reconstruction before it was complete. Acknowledging the fundamental ambivalence of Marx's work, they came to the conclusion that their New Reading must be completed rather than reconstructed. Their subsequent work has endeavoured to do so with Backhaus

54 Backhaus, *On the Dialectics of the value form* 107-8.

55 Helmut Reichelt, *Why Did Marx Conceal His Dialectical Method?* 58

56 Bellofiore and Riva, 28

57 Reichelt, *Social reality* 46/47

focusing on the distinct methodology of the Critique of Political Economy and Reichelt developing the notion of the social validity of exchange.⁵⁸ Yet, despite their initial motivations and frequent comparisons between Marx and Adorno, they have not yet moved from reconstructing or elaborating Marx's critique of the value-form mediated reproduction of the totality of the capitalist social form of production to revisiting or rethinking Adorno's notion of capitalist social totality in conjunction with such a reading of Marx.

III.II Postone's New Reading of the Critique of the Social Constitution of the Negative Totality of the Capitalist Social Form of Production as a Critique of Labour

Moishe Postone's reconstruction of Marx came several decades after Backhaus and Reichelt's initial efforts. Postone is often described as a value-form theorist. His New Reading of Marx does share similarities with the latter; aiming to rejuvenate critical theory by promulgating a new reading of Marx's critique of the negative totality of the social form of capitalist production that distinguishes itself from Traditional Marxism. However, I will argue, in contrast to value-form theory, that Postone's New Reading redeploys the critique of the constitution of the totality of the capitalist social form of production from the standpoint of labour, by reconceptualizing the category of labour. This means that rather than trying to systematically sure up the Adornian lineage of the critique of negative totality, Postone's project, as a critique of labour, can be seen as an immanent criticism of Lukacs' marxian notion of totality.

⁵⁸ For criticisms of Reichelt's notion of social validity see Ingo Elbe and Elena Louise Lange in this volume. For criticisms of gaps in their respective reconstructions of the critique of political economy see Bellofiore and Riva in regard to their lack of a critical political economy and Werner Bonefeld in regard to the lack of the theorization of abstract labour in their interpretation of Marx's monetary theory of value.

As Postone acknowledges his interpretation of Marx is thus ‘itself indebted to Lukács’s rich general approach’.⁵⁹ However, it amends Lukács’s traditional Marxist understanding of Marx’s categories -- as dualistic oppositions between the historically-specific form of capitalist production and its transhistorical content (labour) -- by refocusing the critique of the constitution of the negative totality of the capitalist social form of production on a reconceptualized notion of labour. Postone thus argues, contra Lukacs, that form and content are internally related. From this perspective, it is the contradictory, reciprocal, and dynamic relationship between concrete and abstract labour that constitutes and reproduces the historically-specific negative totality of the capitalist social form of production.

Postone’s reconstruction of Marx thus proceeds by unfolding how Marx’s method of presentation concretizes this contradictory unity of labour in his “substantive” notion of negative totality. “*Value*” is a category of” this “directionally dynamic totality” further exemplified by capital as an automatic subject. Postone’s notion of the treadmill effect further concretizes this directional dynamic pointing to its contradictory nature, and the possibility of its overcoming.⁶⁰

As Postone states this means that the historically-specific form of *labour* is the object of his critique of the social constitution of the negative totality of the capitalist social form of production. In contrast to Lukacs, such a totality should then be abolished rather than seized.

Yet Postone’s critique of negative totality as a critique of labour means, on one hand, as Arthur⁶¹ and Heinrich⁶² point, out that Postone ultimately

59 Moishe Postone, Lukacs and the Dialectical Critique of Capitalism, 84

60 Postone, Time, Labor, and Social Domination
289-90

61 Chris Arthur, “Subject and Counter-Subject”, *Historical Materialism*, vol 12:3

62 Michael Heinrich, “Too Much Production: Postone’s New Interpretation of Marx Provides a Categorical Critique with Defecits” <https://libcom.org/library/too-much-production-postone%E2%80%99s-new-interpretation-marx%E2%80%99s-theory-provides-categorical-crit>

provides a foreshortened account of the reproduction of totality; insofar as the forms of value are not treated as the necessary perverted forms of manifestation of labour, which possess their own supra-individual social objectivity that compel the process of accumulation and reproduction. But also, on the other hand, as Bonefeld points out, Postone never accounts for the genesis of the historically specific form of labour that is meant to be abolished, nor the class struggle through which it persists. Finally, despite gestures towards how his reconstruction of the critique of the social constitution of the negative totality of the capitalist social form of production is likewise a critique of capitalist political economy and capitalist social totality -- such as gestures towards the state and subjectivity⁶³ -- Postone's account of how the contradiction between abstract and concrete labour constitute and mediate these notions of totality are fragmentary. Thus in a manner echoing Lukacs, labour is ultimately posited as constituting a totality it is at the same time constitutive of, but again, like Lukacs, Postone's critique of totality is likewise ultimately hampered by a foreshortened account of how labour, even in its historically specific concrete and abstract form, mediates the reproduction of all of its parts.

IV Bonefeld's Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy

IV: Synthesizing and supplementing the New Readings of the Critique of the Negative Totality of the Capitalist Social Form of Production

63 In regard to subjectivity, Postone notes that TLSD "begins" to "outline aspects of the subjective dimension of Marx's theory of the constitution of modern social life by determinate structured forms of social practice" 155. Yet here, and elsewhere, he does not detail how, why, and to what extent subjectivity as such is created by these forms of social practice. In regard to the state he rightly mentions that "Marx's analysis of production implicitly argues that this dimension cannot be grasped in terms of the state or civil society. On the contrary, the historical dynamic of developed capitalism increasingly embeds and transforms both of those spheres. At issue, therefore, is not the relative importance of "the economy" and "the state," but the nature of social mediation in capitalism, and the relation of that mediation to the directional dynamic characteristic of that society." 58 Yet like Marx, he implicitly argues rather than substantiates this process of embedding and transformation. see also Moishe Postone, Critique, state and economy », in (ed: Rush, Fred) The Cambridge companion to critical theory pp. 165-193, Cambridge University Press.) which essentially reiterates his criticisms of Pollock, and by extension early Critical Theory's, ideas of state capitalism.

Werner Bonefeld's recent *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy* eschews reconstruction, focusing instead on elaborating the critical theoretical New Reading of Marx. Bonefeld's notion of negative totality as a historically-specific form of "unity in separation" or "disunity in the form of unity" can be said to do so in two regards. In the first place, it synthesizes the Postonian critique of the negative totality of the capitalist social form of production as a critique of labour with Backhaus and Reichelt's account of the value-form mediated reproduction of said notion of totality. Moreover, it also addresses the blind spots in each New Reading, in regard to each other's theories, and by elaborating critical theoretical notions of primitive accumulation and class. In the second place, Bonefeld contributes the development of a New Reading of the critique of the negative totality of capitalist political economy by supplementing his further development of the new reading of the critique of the totality of the social form of capitalist production with his account of the state and world market.

In regard to the first, Bonefeld argues that primitive accumulation is the historical genesis of the negative totality of the capitalist social form of production. For the former -- as the process of separation demarcating the historical specificity of the capitalist social form of production -- is the premise that appears in its results. The ensuing class dynamic of antagonistic reproduction that issues from these conditions thus constitutes and reproduces the "perverted" and autonomous social whole in which the supersensible real abstractions of value subsist through the sensuous practice of the likewise negative entity of class struggle.

In so doing, such a critique substantiates the historical specificity of Postone's critique of labour, aligning it with Backhaus and Reichelt's monetary theory value. Bonefeld's further supplementation of this

synthesis with a critical theoretical reading of class as negative category qua personification that develops Adorno's characterizations of the latter, thus provides a synthetic and systematic account of the New Reading's critique of the social constitution and reproduction of the negative totality capitalist social form, wherein

The categories of abstract labour, value, exchange value, money, capital, surplus value, capital accumulation, etc., presuppose the systematic content of primitive accumulation in their conceptuality – a conceptuality of separation qua social unity. Unity appears in the form of a movement of real economic abstractions that, endowed with an invisible force, govern over and prevail through the social individuals ... This disappearance is therefore also an appearance of the social individuals as personifications of economic categories, bearers of particular class interests.⁶⁴

IV. II The New Reading of the Critique of the Negative Totality of Capitalist Political Economy

In addition Bonefeld's, notion of negative totality" addresses another blind spot in the critical theoretical reading of the critique of political economy, returning to and elaborating Marx's aforementioned hints at how the state and world market are integral to the constitution of negative totality by capitalist social labour and its reproduction via exchange. Accordingly, the capitalist state subsists within the world market as the "concentrated and organized force of society' that is separate yet integral the economy; perpetuating exchange relations by "facilitating the (free) economy as a politically ordered freedom". By virtue of its unity qua disunity with the economy, the state thus "maintains the unity of the disunited social relations, and contains class antagonism on the basis of law and morality, and by means of force."⁶⁵

64 Bonefeld, *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy*,91

65 Ibid. 182 Bonefeld's theory of the state and by extension his *Critique of the Negative Totality of Capitalist Political Economy* builds on the aforementioned German and English state debates. For Bonefeld the work of Johannes Agnoli and Simon Clarke are particularly important. A discussion of this discourse stands outside the confines of this chapter. For an account of its development see

From this perspective, Bonefeld's work can be said to represent a new stage in the development of the New Reading of critical theoretical notion of negative totality of the capitalist social form of production; combining and fleshing out the critique of such a conception of negative totality qua labour with the critique of the reproduction of said totality via the mediation of exchange. Moreover, his project of elaboration, rather than reconstruction, ultimately supplements these accounts by developing a new reading of the critique of the totality of capitalist political economy, via his theorizations of the world market and the state, which elaborate the essential role the state plays in the reproduction of negative totality.

Conclusion: Towards a New Reading of The Critique of the Negative Totality of Capitalist Society

As my critical map of the path of totality has endeavoured to show, the development of such a critical notion of negative totality can thus be seen as one of elaboration rather than reconstruction. For Marx does not possess a singular and coherent notion of totality that can be reconstructed. Rather, he points towards a critique of the negative totality of capitalist society, capitalist political economy, and three approaches to the critique of the negative totality of the social form of capitalist production. Moreover, not only did Lukacs and Adorno take up and develop different aspects of Marx's critique of political economy as a critique of capitalist social totality, but the ensuing New Readings of Backhaus, Reichelt, Postone and Bonefeld have sought to remedy the insufficiencies in Lukacs, Adorno's and even Marx's theory by systematising the critique of the negative totality of the capitalist form of production and the negative totality of capitalist political economy.

Okane, State Violence. For its influence on Bonefeld's work see Chris O'Kane, On Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy, *Historical Materialism*, Forthcoming

This indicates that such a trajectory can be characterized as one that has led to the elaboration of the critique of the social constitution and reproduction of the negative totality of the capitalist social form of production as well as the negative totality of capitalist political economy. Moreover, rather than mere Marxology, these developments have also been utilized to critique the contemporary misery of capitalist society whilst pointing to its overcoming.⁶⁶ That being said, these notions of totality are still lacking important elements of contemporary capitalist society which Lukacs and Adorno's critique of the totality of capitalist society once aspired to develop.

This raises the possibility of further developing these new readings of totality into a New Reading of the Critique of the Negative Totality of Capitalist Society. Such a reading would emulate the object of Lukacs and Adorno's critiques without their theoretical shortcomings. Towards this end, in closing, I point to further elaborating this New Reading.

In the first place, such a New Reading might ground this notion of the constitution and reproduction of the negative totality of capitalist society by reinterpreting Marx's definition of society in the Trinity Formula in conjunction with his discussion of the negative totality of capitalist society in the *Grundrisse*.⁶⁷ This would mean conceiving of the negative totality of capitalist society as

both a production process of the material conditions of existence for the members of society, for human life altogether, and a process ... which reproduces these relations of production themselves and with this the *whole range* of bearers of this process of production, their material conditions of existence and their relations of production and reproduction because the totality of these relationships which the bearers of this production have towards nature and each other, the relationships in which they produce, is *society*, viewed according to its economic structure.⁶⁸

66 see Werner Bonefeld, *Critical Theory in a Time of Misery*, Moishe Postone, *Marx in the Time of Trump*.

67 *Ibid*.

68 Marx, *Manuscripts*, 884

Yet rather than solely grasping society according to its economic structure within the sphere of the capitalist economy, (or of a centered or decentered base and superstructure), it would focus on how social relations (and their subjective objective components) in their entirety are implicated in the constitution, autonomisation, inversion and dominating reproduction of a totality whose “inner structure” (if not the entirety of everyday life) is subordinated to the process of capitalistic reproduction.

This conception of social constitution and reproduction could then ground the incorporation of a number of other significant social phenomena -- in addition to the economy and the state -- into this New Reading of the Negative Totality of Capitalist Society.

The first would be the domination of nature. As I showed above Marx’s fullest conception of the totality of the capitalist social form of production conceives of its reproduction via the metabolism with nature. Whilst Lukacs and Adorno provided different perspectives on this issue (arguably at odds with their Marxian theory of totality⁶⁹), and Bonefeld signals the basis of the historically specific form of the capitalist metabolism of nature, and has even turned to grounded the critique of political economy on it in his recent work, the effects of the latter on nature have been elided in the new readings. Yet, in a time of looming ecological catastrophe, critical theorization of the intercourse between negative totality and nature, qua capitalistic reproduction, is sorely needed. Not only to grasp the degradation of the latter by the former, but

69 See Lukacs comments in this regard in the 1967 preface to HCC. This brings up the question of the relationship between Adorno’s theory of the domination of nature and capitalist society. Many argue that the former amounted to Adorno abandoning the Marxian bases of his critical theory for a transhistory theory of instrumental reason. Others, such as Bonefeld and Tomba, read the latter as a history of the present.

also to begin to come to grips with how such a relationship can be transcended.⁷⁰

The second would be incorporating the fuzzy sphere of ‘civil society’, into the constitution and reproduction of negative totality. This might be done by drawing on and incorporating the recent work being done on reproductive labour by thinkers such as Roswitha Scholz⁷¹, Endnotes⁷², Amy De’ath⁷³ and Stefano Ba⁷⁴ and others into this conception of negative totality. For the labor that occurs outside of the economic and political sphere is integral to the production “process of the material conditions of existence for the members of society, for human life altogether,” and the “process ... which reproduces these relations of production themselves” and those actors who participate in these relations are likewise reduced to bearers of this overall process.

In addition, the formation of subjectivity would have to be further developed. As I have noted this component of negative totality has received little attention from Marx, Lukacs, or the New Readings. Yet, for Adorno, the formation of maimed subjectivity by the supradividual dynamic negative totality was integral to its reproduction and perpetuation.⁷⁵

70 This points to the dimensions of stressing the historical specificity of the critique of political economy as a critical social theory that are least helpful. For, In addition to overcoming capitalist social relations, a non-capitalistic metabolism with nature would have to overcome industrial infrastructures created by the former. Yet at the same time, at least from a critical theoretical perspective, the former would not idealize a neo-romantic unity with nature, but rather a new metabolism based on mutual interdependence and free time. In my view such an elaboration would need to take up Alfred Schmidt’s work on Marx’s concept of nature against his misreadings by ecomarxists such as Foster. For my attempt to integrate the former in regard to the domination of nature with the critique of the totality of capitalist political economy for the latter see Carl Cassegård’s excellent “Eco-Marxism and the Critical Theory of Nature” *Distinktion* Volume 18 2017 issue 3

71 See Roswitha Scholz, 2009 *Patriarchy and Commodity Society: Gender without the Body* in (Ed.) Neil Larsen et al, *Marxism and the Critique of Value and Feminism, Emancipation and the abolition of identity?* In (ed) Best et al,

72 Endnotes, *The Logic of Gender*, *Endnotes*, Vol 3.

73 Amy De’Ath, *Gender and Social Reproduction* in (ed) Best et al.

74 Stefano Ba, “Critical Theory and the Work-Family Articulation, Capital and Class, Vol 41, Issue 3, 2017

75 See *la societe autophage*, Anselm Jappe’s newly published attempt at the former.

Finally, the development of the latter, in tandem with work being done on gendered, racialized and abject subjects would also further aid critical theories of right-wing authoritarian populism. Postone and Bonefeld have provided important work on how perceptions of nationalism, racism and anti-semitism pertain to politics premised on critiques of misery that fail to grasp totality. Incorporating these elements of subjectivity would further elaborate how these perceptions -- when aligned with the formation of subjectivity with the abject scapegoating of racialized and gendered identities -- lead to the embrace of these regressive political movements.

At the same time, the further development of this conception of the critique of negative totality as an antagonistic and dominating objective subjective form of differentiated social unity would aid its overcoming. For not only would such a notion of negative social totality point to the negativity of the capitalist social form, and the internal reciprocal objective subjective domains of the economy and the state; but also the realms of nature, subjectivity, and civil society integral to the perpetuation of capitalist social totality.

In so doing, the negative status of this critique of capitalist social totality would still eschew the criticisms leveled at the expressive notion of social totality, insofar as this conception of totality does not posit a subject that is ultimately responsible for its constitution or reproduction, nor a politics that amounts to seizing and ruling capitalist totality. Rather, by critiquing the constitution of the autonomous supraindividual dominating separate-yet-related realms of modern society that invert to compel and shape the subjectivity of individuals to reproduce these spheres and with them society, such an approach to the negative social totality of capitalist would do so in a manner that grasps the movement

of the dynamic of capitalist reproduction and its overcoming as tantamount to overcoming antagonistic social relations with each other and nature. A critical theory of society that Althusser, Habermas, and poststructuralist analyses have missed, but one that is all too appropriate to our miserable era.

Bibliography

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor W. 2001a *Negative Dialectics*. [Trans by Dennis Redmond.] <http://members.efn.org/~dredmond/ndtrans.html>
- . 2001b 2001, “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?” [Translated by Dennis Redmond].
<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/adorno/1968/late-capitalism.htm>
- Althusser, Louis 2005. *For Marx*. London: Verso.
- Althusser, Louis et al. 2009. *Reading Capital*. London: Verso
- Arthur, Chris 2004a. “Subject and Counter-Subject”, *Historical Materialism*, vol 12:3 93–102.
- . 2004b *The New Dialectic and Marx’s Capital*: Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers.
- Backhaus, Hans-Georg 1992. “Between Philosophy and Science: Marxian Social Economy as Critical Theory.” in *Open Marxism* 1 ed. by Werner Bonefeld et al.: 54–92.
- Bellofiore, Riccardo “Marx after Hegel: Capital as Totality and the Centrality of Production,” *Crisis and Critique*, <http://crisiscritique.org/political11/Riccardo%20Bellofiore.pdf>
- Bellofiore, Riccardo and Tommaso Redolifi Riva, 2015. “the Neue Marx Lektüre: Putting the critique of political economy back into the critique of society”, *Radical Philosophy*, 189
- . “Hans-Georg Backhaus” in Best, Bonefeld, O’kane (ed) *The Sage Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*. London : Sage
- Bonefeld, Werner 2014. *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy*. London: Bloomsbury
- Clarke, Simon 1980. ‘Althusserian Marxism’, in *One Dimensional Marxism. Althusser and the Politics of Culture*, edited by Simon Clarke, Terry Lovell, Kevin McDonnell, Kevin Robins and Victor Seidler, 7–102 (London: Allison & Busby)
- Clarke 1991. *The State Debate* (London: Palgrave).
- Colletti, Lucio 1973. *Marxism and Hegel*. Translated by L. Garner. London:Verso Books.

Elbe, Ingo 2013. "Between Marx, Marxism and Marxisms," *Viewpoint*, October 21, 2013
<https://www.viewpointmag.com/2013/10/21/between-marx-marxism-and-marxisms-ways-of-reading-marxs-theory/>

Reichert, Helmut 2018. "Helmut Reichert" in Best, Bonefeld, O'Kane (ed) *The Sage Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory* Endnotes, The Logic of Gender, *Endnotes*, Vol 3.

Engster, Frank 2014. *Das Geld als Mass, Mittel und Methode. Das Rechnen mit der Identität der Zeit*, Neofelis, Berlin.

Habermas, Jurgen 1981. *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Volume One, Boston: Beacon Press

———. 1981. *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Volume Two, Boston: Beacon Press

———. 1987. *Philosophical Discourses of Modernity*. Boston: MIT Press.

Heinrich, Michael 1996. "Engels' Edition of the Third Volume of 'Capital' and Marx's Original Manuscript." *Science & Society*: 452–466.

———. 2004 "Too Much Production: Postone's New Interpretation of Marx Provides a Categorical Critique with Defecits" *Jungle World*, July 7th,

———.

(forthcoming) *The Science of Value*. Leiden: Brill.

Holloway, John and Sol Picciotto (ed.) 1978. *Capital and State* (London: Arnold.

Hoff, Jan 2017. *Marx Worldwide*. Leiden: Brill.

Jay, Martin 1984. *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lotz, Christian 2014. *The Capitalist Schema: Time, Money and the Culture of Abstraction*. Lexington Books.

Lukács, Georg. 1972. *History and Class Consciousness*. [Trans. by Rodney Livingstone.] New York: The MIT Press.

Marx, Karl 1992. *Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*. [Trans. Ben Fowkes.] London: Penguin Classics.

———. 1993a. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol. 3*. [Trans. by David Fernbach] London: Penguin Classics.

———. 1993b. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*. Penguin Classics.

———. 1999 *Wage Labor and Capital*
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1847/wage-labour/index.htm>

Murray, Patrick 2017, *The Mismeasure of Wealth*. Leiden: Brill.

O'Kane, Chris 2014. "State Violence, State Control": Marxist State Theory and the Critique of Political Economy", *Viewpoint*, 4, 2014.

———. 2015. "The Process of Domination Spews out Tatters of Subjugated Nature": Critical Theory, Negative Totality and the State of

- Extraction" in *Black Box 1: Oakland*, PM Press
- .2018. "Society Maintains Itself Despite all the Catastrophes that May Eventuate": Critical Theory, Negative Totality, Authoritarianism and Crisis." *Constellations*, forthcoming.
- Postone, Moishe. 1994. *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- .2003. "Lukacs and the Dialectical Critique of Capitalism in Robert Abrittton and John Simoulidis ed. *New Dialectics and Political Economy*: London: Palgrave.
- .2004, "Critique, State, Economy" in Fred Rush (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Reichelt, Helmut 2000. "Jurgen Habermas'; Reconstruction of Historical Materialism." in *The Politics of Change: Globalization, Ideology, and Critique*. ed. by Werner Bonefeld and Kosmas Psychopedis. London: Palgrave.
- Roberts, William Clare 2016. *Marx's Inferno*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Schmidt, Alfred 1983. *History and Structure*. Cambridge Ma: MIT Press.
- Scholz, Roswitha 2009 Patriarchy and Commodity Society: Gender without the Body in (Ed.) Neil Larsen et al, *Marxism and the Critique of Value*
- .2018 Feminism, Emancipation and the abolition of identity? In (ed) Best et al.