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Critique as a way of overcoming quixotism

On the development of critique in Marx

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That critique must be practical and revolutionary is something already set out by Marx in his famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach. But where or in which sphere of the social can this active critique begin? Where does it have its place? What are its conditions and what does it link up with? Marx already develops an answer to the first question in his early writings, in his critique of the state and politics. If there are hidden elements for a classless society, then they are to be found in the area of production and reproduction, in the social relationship of the classes. Not even a revolutionary-minded state power can be an effective lever of revolutionary critique. As early as ten years before the publication of the first volume of *Capital*, we find an answer to the second question in a programmatic passage in the *Grundrisse*: "[...] if we did not find concealed in society as it is the material conditions of production and the corresponding relations of exchange prerequisite for a classless society, then all attempts to explode it would be quixotic".[1]

Towards a definition of the sphere

For Marx, the social is not a continuum in which resistance and critique can break out and take effect equally at every point. Marx conceives social reality as divided into totally separate spheres, the relationship of which is characterized by opposition and conflict. In it, the decisive spheres are the state on the one hand, and society on the other. Marx develops this thesis primarily in the extensive manuscript, "Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right", which should not be confused with the very popular preface, and in the programmatic text, "On the Jewish Question". This separation and opposition is a historical result. Under feudalism, according to Marx, the socio-economic and the political were intimately bound together and the elements of everyday life were directly elements of the state. Heide Gerstenberger's major study, *Die subjektlose Gewalt. Theorie der Entstehung bürgerlicher Staatsgewalt,* has brilliantly endorsed Marx's view. Before the modern age, the idea of a state apparatus that was opposed to society and separated from it was inconceivable. Mastery and servitude in the economic sphere also meant mastery and servitude in the political: in other words, these separations made little sense then. "This personal character of mastery is quite difficult for modern sociologists to grasp. Therefore, they tend to view the servants of reigning monarchs as the executive organs of an early modern state, and to apply the familiar term of official power to a generalized power."[2]

Marx explains the collapse and destruction of this feudalism by no means as something dependent on the conditions of nascent capitalism, but primarily as the result of revolutionary, emancipatory effort. The result was only half an emancipation, a cul-de-sac that was reinforced in the final separation of bourgeois

economic existence from the abstract political mode of existence as citizens. “Where the political state has achieved its full development, man leads a double life, a heavenly and an earthly life, not only in thought or consciousness but in *actuality*. In the *political community*, he regards himself as a *communal being*; but in *civil society* he is active as a *private individual*, treats other men as means, reduces himself to a means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers. The political mind is as spiritual in relation to civil society as heaven is in relation to earth.”[3]

According to Marx, the French Revolution in particular made this separation of state and society complete. In his depiction, Marx uses drastic images: at one point, he talks about “hostile forces”[4] that confront each other, with each member having the option, if necessary, of changing sides. He sharply criticizes Hegel’s efforts to negotiate this conflict. The state bureaucracy cannot become society, he argues, nor can the estates and corporations evolve into elements of the state. To my mind, this institutional analysis is the only way to explain the experiences with the fate of formerly opposing forces; no sooner have they attained their position at the helm of state then they very rapidly become forces supportive of it, and betray what were once their ideals. Likewise, the definition of political life as “rarified existence” characterizes political phenomena in all their unreality. The opposition of state and society, which Hegel seeks to reconcile by every rhetorical means, becomes the source of all kinds of illusions and fantasies about the supposed power and significance of the political.

The historical attempt to create a self-organizing, political community has failed, Marx concludes. Emancipation reaches its maximum, then, when the state transcends the specific features of the civil society – Marx is thinking not least about religion – and when all citizens are formally regarded as equals. This development

can only be protected from relapses; it can no longer be driven forward. So the explosive elements, those elements that can overcome quixotism, are not to be found in the sphere of the political but, rather, in that social relationship that is also expressed in the apparent values of things: in the capital relation. The opposition of state and society can only be overcome through the transformation of society itself, through the abolition of the capital relation; everything else is an illusion. "Wherever there are political parties, each party will attribute *every* defect of society to the fact that its rival is at the helm of the state instead of itself. Even the radical and revolutionary politicians look for the causes of evil not in the *nature* of the state but in a *specific form of the state* which they would like to replace with *another* form of the state."[5]

For Marx, state power is not a means of emancipatory, revolutionary critique. He notes quite clearly a significant powerlessness on the part of the state. Were the state to seek to intervene in society in order to shape it, it would inevitably fail. "If the modern state desired to abolish the *impotence* of its administration, it would have to abolish contemporary *private life*. And to abolish private life, it would have to abolish itself, since it exists *only* as the antithesis of private life."[6] And as a résumé of the French Revolution, clearly, Marx writes: "In moments of special concern for itself, political life seeks to repress its presupposition, civil society and its elements, and to constitute itself the actual, harmonious species-life of man. But it can do this only in *violent* contradiction with its own conditions of existence by declaring the revolution to be *permanent*, and thus the political drama is bound to end with the restoration of religion, private property, and all the elements of civil society just as war ends with peace."[7]

The hidden elements of the classless society

Marx recognizes the decisive level in the capital relation, in the relationship between capital and workers that is mediated through wage labour. So the hidden, explosive moments can only be detected in this sphere, if at all. In *Capital*, Marx doesn't analyse every social relationship imaginable, but only the one between wage labour and capital. Alongside the capital relation, numerous others co-exist, such as the sexual relationship, the relationship between children and parents, etc. Why is it said that, where oppression and liberation are concerned, the capital relation is the key relationship? It is a position that is frequently seen as the expression of a specific narrow-mindedness relating to Marx. But in my view, such criticism does not acknowledge the distinctive feature of this relationship. What is this feature?

The capital relation itself displays a peculiarity that distinguishes it from all other relationships: it appears in a feature *(Dingeigenschaft)*, i.e. in the magnitude of value/price of commodities. It is therefore in a form whereby it no longer appears as a social relationship. You cannot tell from capital that it consists of cumulative, unpaid overtime, that it is therefore based on a social temporal relationship, or rather, that it *is* in fact this relationship. The outcome of the class relationship is arbitrarily cumulable in monetary form; furthermore, it is usable at another point in time and in another place to such an extent that it reproduces itself all over again. All other social relationships are different; not one of them displays this particular feature. The fact that this peculiarity could develop historically is based on the release of the socio-economic as a self-willed sphere. Again, it is the fall of feudalism, the separation of the sphere of the political state from society, that makes it possible to pick out economics as social relationship as a

central theme. One can only speak of economics, in the strict sense, within the capitalist mode of production. As Polanyi has shown, the economic is structurally interwoven with political, moral, noble and cultural references in pre-capitalist societies. For example, an analysis of the economic dynamic in its pure form, such as Marx undertakes for the capitalist mode of production, cannot be applied to a classical economy. So there is something to be said for applying the concept of class and mode of production in the emphatic sense to capitalism only.

The sphere of economics is not a continuum either

A comment on the structure of *Capital* is appropriate at this point. In the Marxist analysis of capital, we find a double shift in perspective, the first being brought out more sharply and trenchantly than the second. The first change, deliberately staged by Marx as a piece of rhetoric, occurs between the sphere of the surface of circulation and the sphere of production. The analysis of the surface of circulation, with which Marx begins *Capital*, shows us no dynamic, no conflict or social imbalance whatsoever. Things of equivalent value are exchanged between free and equal parties. With the shift to production, the picture changes radically: we suddenly gain insight into the dynamics. Capital accumulates and multiplies actual power by comparison with labour; however, it also develops the social productivity of labour, which in turn must be reflected in the general trend towards a drop in profit margins. I would like to draw out two aspects in particular from this: first of all, Marx shows that the surface of circulation – very much a real sphere of society – cannot be grasped of and by itself; secondly, in the transition from money to capital, Marx achieves his most elaborated concept of the proletariat, i.e. as a general labour-power that, if possible – Marx uses the phrase δυνάμει [8] ('potentially') –

stands in opposition to capital. The second change of perspective cannot be carried out with the same sharpness. It is the shift from the relationship of individual capitals and those preoccupied by it, of the competition among a plurality of capitals, to what is primarily a class relationship. This total relationship is fully anticipated but it is only theoretically formulated in the concept of the production price. Only through the equalization of the profit rate is the capital relationship revealed for what it is: a temporal relationship between classes.

The class relationship is a temporal relationship

If the elements of the classless society are found to be "hidden", or rather, if these elements result from the dynamic of the capital relationship, then they must *also* be found in capitalism's ordering of time. And so they are. The central concepts for it are necessary labour-time and overtime. With the first definition of the concept of necessary labour-time, in the first chapter of *Capital* in which the magnitude of value is defined, we seem to be dealing with an internal concept of the capitalist mode of production. Without offering any service in return, the ruling class has accumulated labour-time at its disposal; it is thus reliant on new labour-time and also, therefore, on living time.

At the same time, however, the concept of necessary labour-time transcends the capital relation. This necessary labour-time is *also* a decisive quantity for a post-capitalist society. The concept of necessary labour-time can thus be articulated in two ways: on the one hand, in capitalism's value/price system, i.e. in definitions that are "valid" within this society only; on the other hand, as quantities of time that can be expressed independently of the value form. Castoriadis had accused Marx of wavering between the levels of

capitalist economics and all forms of economics. Marx doesn't waver at all – quite the contrary. That he was able to articulate this concept of *both-and* stands among the most important achievements of the Marxist analysis of capital.

What dynamic underlies the temporal relationship?

In *Capital*, Marx analyses it "in its pure form". But it should be stressed that the "pure form" can only be a question of a "pure dynamic". On the one hand, this dynamic could only be presented by Marx on the basis of earlier developments in his era; on the other, it could only be anticipated as an experiment. One of the most exciting and frequently cited passages in this regard is the so-called 'Fragment on Machines' in the *Grundrisse*. Reading through this passage, we find a Marx intent on searching, on discussion.

The starting point is the anticipated massive increase in the productive power of labour. If it were possible to produce ever greater quantities of utility values with less and less work, then "production based on exchange value" would have to break down. [9] Let us be perfectly clear: nowhere does Marx state that, beyond a specific point, the law of value is no longer valid, as is discernable in the work of Negri or Virno. On the contrary, work no longer stands in relation to the quantity of utility values produced. If the productive power of labour is low, then all members of society have to work all day long to be able to reproduce. Consequently, it makes sense to talk about a relation; in such conditions, for instance, exploitation is possible only in a very restricted way. If productive power increases, it facilitates class relations. If it increases massively, the relationship of labour-time and product develops into a "monstrous disproportion" [10] that shakes the capital relation to its very foundations.

On the permanent production of the proletariat, or: class struggle is to resist being made into a class

Marx's work offers us no blueprint on how critique can actually become practical; it does, however, offer a methodological knowledge base with which to actually pose the question in the first place. Critique has lately become synonymous with class struggle. But what is class, what is class struggle? If we define capitalism as an ordering of time and the proletariat as labour-power opposing capital, then we can bring these two definitions together: *the proletariat is then labour-power that is subject to the capitalist ordering of time*. In a penetrating analysis, John Holloway has referred to the procedural aspect. The proletariat is not simply there; it is constantly produced anew. Resistance can be constantly crushed or absorbed; the possibility of an escape from wage labour can be constantly removed. Class struggle is the attempt to fight against being made into a class. In post-Fordism, the bell has rung for the start of a new round in this clash, often taking forms, though, that neither critics of Marxism nor its orthodox protagonists recognize as class differences. The expansion of market relations into the depths of production and society does not transcend the proletariat's social mode of existence; rather, it expands it. The new independence turns out to be a hidden form of piece-work, labour-time penetrates into living time. When Paolo Virno says that, at present, "living labour as a whole exists permanently in the conditions of the industrial reserve force"[11], the statement is undoubtedly an accurate one. The extensive reframing of the social system to *workfare* also subjects unpaid work to the imperatives of the capitalist time economy: time-out of any kind will become impossible. Today more than ever, in order to release the hidden, revolutionary elements, critique must be a

critique of form: a critique of wage labour, or rather, a critique of the mindless orientation towards wage labour in view of its social erosion.

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(**Translator's Note: where applicable, English sources are referenced in the Endnotes below.*)

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[1] Karl Marx *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* tr. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Classics, 1993), see www.googlebooks.co.uk, p. 159.

[2] Heide Gerstenberger, *Die subjektlose Gewalt. Theorie der Entstehung bürgerlicher Staatsgewalt*. Münster: Dampfboot 2006, p. 141 (MO'N translation, page reference to the German text only).

[3] Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question", in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* by Loyd David Easton, Kurt H. Guddat, Hackett Publishing 1997, see www.googlebooks.co.uk, p. 228.

[4] Karl Marx, "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of the State (1843)", in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, see www.googlebooks.co.uk, p. 199.

[5] Karl Marx, "Critical Notes on the Article "The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian", www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/08/07.htm ..

[6] Karl Marx, “Critical Notes on the Article “The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian”, www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/08/07.htm .

[7] Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question”, in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, see www.googlebooks.co.uk, p. 228

[8] Karl Marx *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* tr. Nicolaus, see www.googlebooks.co.uk, p. 91.

[9] Ibid. p. 705.

[10] Ibid p. 705.

[11] Paolo Virno, op. cit., p. 151 (MO‘N translation, page reference to the German text only).