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Notes on Wealth as a Real Abstraction and the Critique of Suffering

Keywords

critical theory, real abstraction, critique, suffering, wealth, economic compulsion

Abstract

The object of a critical theory of society is Man [*Menschen*] in her historically specific forms of life. The article argues against ontological conceptions of social labour and of economy. Instead it insists that historical materialism far from being a materialism of nature and history, is fundamentally a critique of the objectivity of the capitalist economic categories. For a critical theory of society, the economic concept, capital as a process of the valorisation of value, is not a natural thing but a social relationship between persons that is mediated through things. The fetishism of commodities is real. In the mediated world the social individuals appear as personifications of the economic object; and yet there would be nothing without their social practices—of self-preservation. Human suffering is objectively mediated. The article concludes that suffering is the non-conceptual content of the concept of society as a process of valorisation. The sheer unrest of life is the social constituent of the economic object.

Beleške o bogastvu kot realni abstrakciji in kritiki trpljenja

Ključne besede

kritična teorija, realna abstrakcija, kritika, trpljenje, bogastvo, ekonomska prisila

Povzetek

Predmet kritične teorije družbe je človek-bitje [*Menschen*] kot proizvajalec zgodovinsko specifičnih oblik življenja. Prispevek se zoperstavlja ontološki koncepciji družbenega dela in ekonomije in zagovarja tezo, da historični materializem nikakor ni materializem narave in zgodovine, marveč je v svojem temelju kritika objektivnosti kapitalističnih

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ekonomskih kategorij. Za kritično teorijo družbe ekonomski koncept – kapital kot proces valorizacije vrednosti – ni preprosto neka »naravna« reč temveč družbeno razmerje med osebami, ki je posredovano kot razmerje med rečmi. Blagovni fetišizem je realen. V posredovanem svetu se posamezniki v družbi prikazujejo kot posebitve ekonomskega objekta; in vendar ne bi bilo nič brez njihovih družbenih praks – samo-ohranitve. Človeško trpljenje je objektivno posredovano. Prispevek podaja sklep, da je trpljenje ne-konceptualna vsebina koncepta družbe kot procesa valorizacije. Gola nemirnost življenja je tako družbeni gradnik ekonomskega objekta.



Given the current state of technical development, the fact that there are still countless millions who suffer hunger and want must be attributed to the forms of social production, the relations of production, not to the intrinsic difficulty of meeting people's material needs.
—Theodor Adorno, *On Interpretation: The Concept of Progress*¹

Immanuel Kant's conception of Enlightenment as humanity's exodus from self-imposed immaturity still possesses subversive cunning. Not only does he speak about self-imposed immaturity, that is Man-made immaturity, but he also sees humanity as a subject that can free herself from the immaturity of her social condition.²

8 The notion of Man emerging from self-imposed immaturity presupposes opposition to the existing social relations. Kant's determination of the role of the scholar acknowledged this. He argued that only that science is true which helps the common Man to her dignity.³ Kant therefore demanded from scholarly work that

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, "On Interpretation: The Concept of Progress (II)," in *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964–1965*, ed. Rolf Tiedermann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 144.

² Man, with a capital "M," is used here and throughout in the combined sense of *Mensch*, *Menschheit* and *Menschlein*—he/she/it or humanity as a concrete universal.

³ See Immanuel Kant, "Fragmente aus dem Nachlasse," in *Immanuel Kant's sämtliche Werke*, ed. G. Hartenstein (Leipzig: Leopold Voss, 1868), 8:625.

it reveals the true character of the political constitution and that failure to do so amounts to a deceitful publicity.⁴

Marx echoed Kant's idea of Enlightenment when he argued that human history would begin once social relations existed in which humanity would no longer be held in bondage as a living means for the accumulation of capitalist wealth, but in which humanity would be an end in itself. Against the bourgeois ideal of abstract equality, which recognizes rich and poor as equal partners in wealth regardless of their inequality in property, Marx argued for an equality of human needs. He went further than Kant by arguing that the unveiling of the true character of the constituted relations of human "immaturity" is not sufficient. In fact, Marx did not conceive of the existing social relations as "immature" in relation to the promise of their further development. Marx's critical theory sets out to show that the capitalist labour economy comprises definite forms of human social practice and that it is therefore the social relations themselves, not their labour economy, that require revolutionising for the sake of a society, he calls it communism, in which humanity is a purpose, not a means.

Towards a Critical Theory of Economic Compulsion: Wealth, Suffering, Negation

Critical theory thinks against the flow of the world, at least that is its intention. The opposite of a critical theory of society is not uncritical theory, however. It is traditional theory, at least according to Max Horkheimer who invoked the notion of a critical theory of society in his seminal essay "Traditional and Critical Theory" of 1937.⁵ If one were to summarise the difference between them, traditional theory, at its best, analyses the world of real (economic) abstractions to comprehend their political, economic, cultural, psychological, social, and historical truth from various standpoints, including the standpoint of labour. By arguing from the standpoint of labour, it establishes what society lacks in terms of

⁴ See Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Abaris, 1979). The inspiration behind this opening of my argument is Johannes Agnoli's "Destruction as the Determination of the Scholar in Miserable Times," in *Revolutionary Writing: Common Sense Essays in Post-Political Politics*, ed. Werner Bonefeld (New York: Autonomedia, 2003), 25–37.

⁵ Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory," in Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (London: Continuum, 2002), 188–243.

the justice and rationality of its labour organisation, and what therefore needs to be done to overcome what it finds to be deplorable in the capitalist labour economy. In contrast, critical theory scrutinises the untruth of the economic abstractions. It asks about the social constitution of the relations of economic compulsion. Instead, then, of “stating what society lacks” with respect to the rational organisation of its labour economy and instead of asking “what praxis must realize” to achieve a more perfect “version of industrial society,”⁶ Adorno’s and Marx’s critical theory of capitalist political economy highlights “what is deplorable about society and has to be abolished.”⁷ What really is the social logic that holds sway in capitalist society? In their judgement, capitalist society does not promise a freedom from want. Rather, it promises that the dispossessed, free traders in labour-power, will have to work for the profit of the buyer of their labour-power to make a living as exploitable human material. Indeed, they understand that both the capitalist and the labourer are subject to the relations of economic compulsion, which under the threat of bankruptcy compels the employer of labour-power to make a profit from the living labour of its seller. What holds sway in capitalist society is the law of value, that is the law of the valorisation of living labour. The law of value posits the necessity of money to beget more money, on the pain of ruin. Marx thus conceived of the social character of capitalist society as an “abstraction in action.”⁸ It is, as Slavoj Žižek put it in the context of the anti-austerity struggles in Greece during the Eurozone crisis, the “real of capital,” one which turns counter-hegemonic struggles for progressive ends into alternative strategies of capitalist development.⁹

Herbert Marcuse articulated the critical meaning of society as an “abstraction in action” well when he argued that in capitalist society the world manifests itself

⁶ Wolfgang Streeck, *How Will Capitalism End? Essays on a Failing System* (London: Verso, 2016), 2.

⁷ Matthias Benzer, “Social Critique in the Totally Socialized Society,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 37, no. 5 (June 2011): 588, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453710393317>. Benzer argues with reference to Adorno’s social theory.

⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume Two*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1978), 185.

⁹ Slavoj Žižek, “Should the Left’s Answer to Rightist Populism Really Be a ‘Me Too’? Part I,” *The Philosophical Salon*, October 15, 2018, http://thephilosophicalsalon.com/should-the-lefts-answer-to-rightist-populism-really-be-a-me-too-part-i/#_edn1, para. 15.

“behind the backs of the individuals; yet it is their work.”¹⁰ On the one hand, the individuals owe their life to what society as a process of silent compulsion does to them. On the other, their endeavour to make a living furnishes society as a compelling abstraction with an independent consciousness and a will. The economic quantities move as if by their own volition beyond human control; and yet, their movement manifests the practices of the social individuals in the form of the economic object. With reference to the social classes, society as an abstraction in action entails, crudely put, that the social reproduction of the free labourers depends on how effective their living labour is exploited for profit by the buyers of their labour-power. Profitable employers hire workers; unprofitable employers go under. They shed labour. For those without independent means, free labourers, their access to the means of subsistence depends on achieving sustained wage income, the premise of which is the enrichment of the capitalist through the consumption of their labour-power, which they relinquished to him by agreeing on a contract of labour.

The money-form of capitalist wealth, money that yields more money, is the real power of society as a process of economic compulsion. Following Simon Clarke,

The drive to force down wages, intensify labour [. . .] is not a matter merely of the subjective motivation of the capitalist, but bears down on the capitalist with the objective force of competition [. . .]. Competition forces every capitalist to seek out means of reducing costs or accelerating the turnover of capital, the better to withstand immediate or anticipated competitive pressure. Thus, the individual capitalist is no less subject to the power of money than is the worker.¹¹

That is to say, exploiting labour for profit is the means of avoiding competitive erosion, liquidation, and bankruptcy. These outcomes are particularly painful for the workers who, left without employment, find themselves cut off from the means of subsistence. Profit is primary. The satisfaction of needs is a sideshow. For the sake of maintaining waged-based access to the means of life, the valori-

¹⁰ Herbert Marcuse, *Negations*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (London: Free Association Press, 1988), 151.

¹¹ Simon Clarke, *Keynesianism, Monetarism and the Crisis of the State* (Aldershot: Edward and Elgar, 1988), 100.

sation of capital is primary, making money out of money from the living labour of a class of people who make a living as free traders in labour-power.

What is “cannot be true.”¹² It is true that to reproduce herself, the worker “must produce surplus value. The only worker who is productive is one who produces surplus value for the capitalist, or in other words contributes towards the self-valorisation of capital.”¹³ There is therefore a misfortune far worse than being a productive worker, and that is the misfortune of being a superfluous worker who, deprived of wage income, depends on the charity of others for her subsistence. It is because of their freedom as sellers of labour-power that the free labourers are prevented from “running away.”¹⁴ Following Herbert Marcuse, the “lash of hunger” compels them to “sell their services” for the profit of another class of Man.¹⁵ The class struggle is not about abstract ideas like socialism. It is a struggle for access to “crude and material things” and it is struggle over the labour process, effectively the conditions of exploitation.¹⁶

Forms of Critique: Forces of Production and Social Critique

The many variations in the Marxist tradition revolve around two contrasting readings of the critique of political economy. Commentators pose the critique of political economy as either a critique of capitalism from the standpoint of labour or a critique of *the* capitalist labour economy. According to the former, capitalism amounts to a historically specific mode of labour economy. This reading argues for a socialist mode of labour economy as the progressive alternative to capitalism. Its conception of socialism is programmatic in that it advocates for a perfected system of labour organisation by means of central planning. According to the latter, the critique of political economy does not argue from the standpoint of labour. On the contrary, it amounts to a negative critique of the capitalist labour economy. Its critique lacks in programmatic features. Instead,

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¹² Ernst Bloch, *Grundfragen der Philosophie: Ausgewählte Schriften, Band I*, ed. Johann Kreuzer (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1965), 336.

¹³ Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 644.

¹⁴ Marx, 719.

¹⁵ Marcuse, *Negations*, 225.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zorn, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Pimlico, 1999), 254.

it holds that the conceptual content of the society of the free and equal might emerge from the negation of the capitalist relations, that is, the struggle against the social conditions of suffering.

According to the standpoint of labour critique of capitalism, labour economy is an ontological principle. It holds that humanity has to exchange with nature to satisfy her needs. It rejects capitalism as a crisis-prone system of labour exploitation for private gain and demands the emancipation of labour from capitalist domination in socialism. Its argument for socialism is founded on a theory of modes of production as historically specific organisational forms of labour economy. According to this point of view, since “in any form of society human beings productively expend their corporeal powers,” the critique of capitalist labour economy has to differentiate between the “generic materiality” of human life as the transhistorical presupposition of the modes of production and the specific capitalist “historical form of wealth.”¹⁷ The analytical focus of this critique of capitalism falls on “the contradictory unity between the materiality of human life and its historically-determined social forms.”¹⁸ That is, it views as historically active the relationship between the transhistorically conceived forces of production and the historically specific social relations of production, as the decisive dynamic for the understanding of capitalism as a mode of production in “transition to communism.”¹⁹ Its conception of communism is founded on an ontological conception of the capitalist labour economy, that is, it argues that labour is the foundation of human existence. Therewith it supposes a transhistorical materiality of labour, and it thus ontologises labour activity in capitalism as an expression of human essence, abstractly conceived.²⁰ It ar-

¹⁷ Guido Starosta, “The Commodity-Form and the Dialectical Method: On the Structure of Marx’s Exposition in Chapter 1 of *Capital*,” *Science and Society* 72, no. 3 (July 2008): 31, 25, <https://doi.org/10.1521/asiso.2008.72.3.295>.

¹⁸ Alex Kicillof and Guido Starosta, “On Materiality and Social Form: A Political Critique of Rubin’s Value-Form Theory,” *Historical Materialism* 15, no. 3 (2007): 24, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156920607X225852>.

¹⁹ Paresh Chattopadhyay, “The Economic Content of Socialism: Marx vs. Lenin,” *Review of Radical Political Economics* 24, no. 3–4 (Fall–Winter 1992): 94, <https://doi.org/10.1177/048661349202400306>; quoted in Kicillof and Starosta, 37.

²⁰ What comes to mind is Adam Smith’s conception of a human propensity to truck and barter that for him is the natural dynamic behind the growth in social wealth through the increase in labour productivity and the (technical and social) division of labour that it brings about. Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed.

gues for communism as a morally rational organization of the natural necessity of labour. In short, the argument for a socialist labour economy recognises the capitalist mode of production as an historically overdetermined mode of labour economy, which through its development of the economic forces compels history forward as the unleashed forces of production come into conflict with the capitalist relations, which become too small and narrow for them, thereby creating the objective conditions for transition to socialism.²¹ As a critique of capitalist political economy, the argument about a transhistorical materiality of labour economy is as fruitless as the conception of the productive forces as a historical subject. The conception of labour economy as the “transhistorical essence of social life,”²² which will be perfected in socialism in the interests of the workers through the application of state-socialist reason, is illusionary in its grasp of capitalist political economy. However, as a dystopia, it is no less real. It replaces the semblance of freedom in market mediated forms of social coercion by the freedom of state socialism as an unmediated form of social coercion.

Following Adorno, the critique of political economy from the standpoint of labour perverts the critical intention of Marx’s historical materialism.²³ In his view, it ontologises the capitalist labour economy and naturalises the capitalist economic categories. The circumstance that Man needs to eat and has therefore to exchange with nature does not explain capitalism nor does capitalism derive from it. Man does not eat in the abstract.²⁴ Nor does Man struggle for life in the abstract. The struggle for life, invoked by Marx (and Engels) as a history of class struggle, takes place in definite forms of society. Instead, then, of transposing “every given struggle into the phrase ‘struggle for life,’” Marx’s critical theory

Edwin Cannan (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981), 1:25. For an argument that Marxist economics derives from classical political economy, see Simon Clarke, *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology: From Adam Smith to Max Weber* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992).

²¹ See, for example, Terry Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 43–4.

²² Moishe Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 167.

²³ See Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 335.

²⁴ As Georg Lukács put it, “existence can have no reality except [. . .] the reality of lived experience.” Georg Lukács, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1973), 179.

requires analyses of the “struggle for life as it manifests itself historically in various specific forms of society.”²⁵

Critically understood historical materialism is critique of capitalist society understood dogmatically as a historically overdetermined form of natural economic necessities and requirements. What appears in the appearance of society as a relationship between economic things is not some abstractly conceived economic nature. Rather, what appears in capitalist society as economic nature is Man in her historically specific social relations. The capitalist economic laws compel the social individuals as if they, the economic laws, were a person apart, and yet, their nature is a social nature. What compels them is their own social world. In the words of Marx, “it is, in reality, much easier to discover by analysis the earthly kernel of the misty creations of religion than to do the opposite, i.e., to develop from the actual, given relations of life the forms in which these have been apotheosized. The latter method” he continues, “is the only materialist one, and therefore the only scientific one.” For him, the former method belongs to the “abstract materialism of the natural sciences, which excludes the historical process.”²⁶ There is only one reality and that is the reality of historically definite forms of life.

Marx’s point about the actual relations of life is key to social form analysis. It asks about the social constitution of the economic categories and expounds their “nature” as a social nature. For social form analysis, therefore, the forces of production and the normative categories are the forces and norms of the actual capitalist social relations. In the words of Moishe Postone, “Marx’s critique transforms the categories of political economy from transhistorical categories of the constitution of wealth into critical categories of the specificity of the forms of wealth and social relations in capitalism.”²⁷ Form analysis is critique of the economic categories as apotheosised forms of definite social relations. It conceives of historical materialism as critique of the existing social relations, including their normative values and forms of thought.

²⁵ Karl Marx to Ludwig Kugelmann, June 27, 1870, in *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels: Collected Works* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975–2004), 43:527.

²⁶ Marx, *Capital, Volume One*, 494n4.

²⁷ Postone, *Time, Labour and Social Domination*, 56.

The social form approach to the critique of political economy emerged from the new left of 1968. It contains three overlapping methodological approaches. They are immanent critique, systematic dialectics, and *ad hominem* critique of the economic categories, which is decipherment of the economic abstractions as the apotheosised forms of definite social relations.

Immanent critique judges reality by the standard of its own claims. For example, it judges the reality of social equality by the standard of its normative claim to equality. By judging reality by its own criteria, it seeks to make the “petrified relations [. . .] dance by singing their own tune to them.”²⁸ Instead of criticising reality as failing to live up to its normative standards, it both demystifies the normative ideas of, say, freedom and equality as the pleasant norms of a dreadful contents, and retains a glimpse of what could be. Matthias Benzer makes this point about the double meaning of immanent critique well when he says with regards to Adorno’s critical theory, the “liberal category of freedom purports to yield the utopian image of a genuinely free individual” but “on closer inspection, it simultaneously depicts an individual released from feudal social structures who is granted the autonomy that the capitalist economy requires of ‘him’; a ‘mockery of true freedom [. . .] which compels the individual towards *ruggedness*.” At the same time, it critiques “society for failing to fulfil conceptual standards” which it “cannot avoid advocating” and which therefore lead to demands for “their social realization.”²⁹ Immanent critique interrogates the social coldness of the normative standard. There is a crack in everything. That is how the light gets in.

Systematic dialectics is associated with the work of Chris Arthur in the UK and the so-called New Reading of Marx of Hans-Georg Backhaus and Helmut Reichelt in the former Federal Republic of Germany.³⁰ Systematic dialectics focuses on the categorical character of the capitalist political economy to under-

²⁸ Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law: Introduction,” trans. Martin Milligan and Barbara Ruhemann, in Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 182.

²⁹ Benzer, “Social Critique,” 583–84.

³⁰ See Chris Arthur, *The New Dialectic and Marx’s Capital* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Chris Arthur, *The Spectre of Capital: Idea and Reality* (Leiden: Brill, 2022); Hans-Georg Backhaus, *Dialektik der Wertform: Untersuchungen zur marxischen Ökonomiekritik* (Freiburg: Ça Ira, 1997); Helmut Reichelt, *Zur logischen Struktur des Kapitalbegriffs bei Karl Marx* (Freiburg: Ça Ira, 2001); Helmut Reichelt, *Neue Marx-Lektüre: Zur Kritik sozialwissenschaftlicher Logik* (Freiburg: Ça Ira, 2013).

stand the logic that holds sway in it. It recognises the social forms as real (economic) abstractions and argues that they establish the social framework within which, as Reichelt put it, the individuals encounter each other, “make contracts in the sphere of circulation, where they deal in mysterious economic forms with so-called ‘goods,’ and who have always already perceived each other as equal and free subjects of law, and, who, prior to this thinly veiled perception of themselves as independent subjects, experienced class society as one of inequality, exploitation and rule by an autonomised system.”³¹ Systematic dialectics elaborates the logic that holds sway in society as a process of real abstraction and expounds the categorical character of the relations of economic compulsion beyond the objective illusions of normative order thinking and the dogmatic materialism of a political left that deems itself capable of transforming the capitalist labour economy for the benefit of its surplus value producers.

Charlotte Baumann’s characterisation of systematic dialectics, the new Reading of Marx in particular, as a logicians’ account of the capitalist social relations is apposite.³² Although systematic dialectics delivers on the logic of the capitalist social nature, its concept of the social is tenuous. Systematic dialectics tends to take the identification of the logic of real abstraction as a goal, which entails the risk of falling back onto the (traditional) differentiation of society into system and lifeworld. Rather than conceptualising the capital relations with reference to the historical elements implicit in them, systematic dialectic posits capital as a conceptual totality akin to a Hegelian idea imposed on reality. For systematic dialectics the category of the free labourer is unsettling, to say the least. For Arthur “labour-power is not produced by capital; it is an external condition of capitalist production.”³³ In contrast Elena Louisa Lange argues that “labor power is [. . .] a capitalistically produced commodity.” She argues that capital produces the commodity “labour power [*sic*]” as “the direct source” of its “raison d’etre:

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³¹ Helmut Reichelt, “Social Reality as Appearance: Some Notes on Marx’s Conception of Reality,” trans. Werner Bonefeld, in *Human Dignity: Social Autonomy and the Critique of Capitalism*, ed. Werner Bonefeld and Kosmas Psychopedis (London: Routledge, 2017), 65.

³² Charlotte Baumann, “Adorno, the New Reading of Marx, and Methodologies of Critique,” in *Adorno and Marx: Negative Dialectics and the Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Werner Bonefeld and Chris O’Kane (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 55–76.

³³ Chris Arthur, “The Inner Totality of Capitalism,” *Historical Materialism* 14, no. 3 (January 2006): 92, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156920606778531752>.

profit.”³⁴ Her identification of the capital relation as a system that produces its own social premise conceives of the social relations in terms of their incorporated functionality. Postone’s account expresses the dualist conception of society as system and as lifeworld. He argues that capital “subjects people to impersonal, increasingly rationalized structural imperatives and constraints,” which “cannot be grasped adequately in terms of class domination.”³⁵ In his account, “capital” as system sets the objective framework within which the social conflicts unfold.

The identification of capital as an extra-social subject presumes what needs to be explained. On one hand, following Adorno, “the reality in which men live is *not unvarying and independent of them.*” On the other, following Clarke, the capitalist relations of production presuppose the historical emergence of a class of free labourers.³⁶ It is the case that a logic holds sway in capitalist political economy. It incorporates the individuals as its personifications. However, its shape remains human. That is to say, the individuals “live in social being, not in [economic] nature,” and their social being has not been given to them by the capitalist economic nature.³⁷ It is rather the historical result of their own—objectively compelled—social practices.

Discovering the untruth of the capitalist relations does not only entail discovery of the logic that holds sway in reified society. It also entails discovery of the simple fact that the capitalist “social order cannot exist without distorting men.”³⁸ The social individuals are not just cogs in a system of economic compulsion. As such cogs, mere human “instruments of production,” they are “possessed with consciousness.”³⁹ As Baumann puts it, they suffer “from the pressures” of their

³⁴ Elena Louisa Lange, *Value without Fetish: Uno Kōzō’s Theory of “Pure Capitalism” in Light of Marx’s Critique of Political Economy* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 47.

³⁵ Moishe Postone, “The Subject and Social Theory: Marx and Lukács on Hegel,” in *History and Heteronomy: Critical Essays*, ed. Koichi Maeda (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Center for Philosophy, 2009), 78.

³⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique*, trans. Willis Domingo (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 28; Clarke, *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology*, 118. See also Simon Clarke, “Class Struggle and the Working Class: The Problem of Commodity Fetishism,” in *The Labour Debate: An Investigation into the Theory and Reality of Capitalist Work*, ed. Ana C. Dinerstein and Michael Neary, eds. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 50–69.

³⁷ Adorno, *Against Epistemology*, 28.

³⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 194.

³⁹ Marx, *Capital, Volume One*, 719.

own reified existence as personifications of the economic categories.⁴⁰ Society as a process of real abstraction does not suffer from the capitalist economic nature. It does not go on strike and does not struggle to make ends meet. The social individuals do, and they do so as personifications of their own social world that in the form of the economic object compels them into action.

On the one hand, the understanding of the mysterious character of the economic things, which “abound with metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties,” rests on the comprehension of the human social practice that furnishes them with a will and a dynamic. The social individuals “do this without being aware of it” in the pursuit of their self-preservation.⁴¹ On the other, although society’s laws of motion abstract “from its individual subjects, degrading them to mere executors, mere partners in social wealth and social struggle, there would be nothing without individuals and their spontaneities.”⁴² Reification, society as system, “finds its limitation in reified Man.”⁴³ That is, the critique of reification amounts to the conceptualised praxis of the capitalist social relations. The preponderance of society as reified object entails the sheer unrest of life as its hidden, non-conceptual foundation and secret history. The need to make suffering speak, to “lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth.”⁴⁴ In this context, suffering is not an existential term of pure subjective feeling, the mush of the soul. Rather, it is an objectively mediated term. It “is the weight of objectivity upon the subject, and because that which the subject experiences as its most subjective moment—the expression of suffering—is objectively mediated.”⁴⁵ While a definite logic holds sway in the social forms, the critique of political economy is decipherment of the social relations that constitute them. It is decipherment of the relations of economic compulsion as relations of the sheer unrest of life.

Concluding Remarks

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Social form analysis interrogates the economic categories as the objectified forms of definite social relations. Furthermore, it argues that the sheer unrest of

⁴⁰ Baumann, “Adorno,” 66.

⁴¹ Marx, *Capital, Volume One*, 163, 166–67.

⁴² Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 304.

⁴³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesellschaftstheorie und Kulturkritik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975), 25.

⁴⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 17–18.

⁴⁵ Adorno, 18; translation modified.

life, the class struggle to avoid and alleviate suffering, is the hidden secret of the relations of economic objectivity.

The social mentality and the forms of thought of the acting individuals are incorporated in the spirit of money. However, money does not talk. It is rather the social individuals who speak in and through money as the independent power of their social relations. Money does not care about inflation or deflation, whether it belongs to the few or is desired by the many, or whether it yields living offspring or crashes. The validity of money is a social validity, and its power to compel the individuals to the point of madness is socially constituted. As the universal of the capitalist relations of economic compulsion, it “compress[es] the particular until it splinters, like a torture instrument.”⁴⁶ Yet, money does not care for the sacrifice of living labour on the altar of profit. The capitalist cares for profit – as he must – to avoid competitive erosion. The free labourers care for money, too. They struggle for money to make a living. In its entirety, the world of economic compulsion is a world of definite forms of human social practice, which endow society in the form of the “money subject” with a cold, calculating consciousness.⁴⁷ The defining character of bourgeois society is social coldness.

The critique of social coldness has to be more than just a normative argument about re-distributive justice, equality and freedom. Theoretical concepts and normative values “cannot be perceived without reference to the historical elements implicit in it.”⁴⁸ The history-making violence which divorced the direct producers from the means of subsistence imbues the bourgeois concepts of freedom and equality with a definite social content that appears in its civilised form as an exchange relationship between supposedly equal legal subjects—one trading her labour-power for a wage to “dodge the freedom to starve,” the other consuming the acquired labour-power for profit to avoid competitive erosion.⁴⁹

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⁴⁶ Adorno, 346.

⁴⁷ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), 144.

⁴⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, ed. Christoph Gödde, trans. Edmund F. N. Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 145.

⁴⁹ Adorno, *History and Freedom*, 201. On law making violence and law preserving violence, see Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund F. N. Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1986), 277–300; Amy Swiffen, “Walter Benjamin’s Concept of Law,” in *The SAGE*

The concepts of justice, humanity, freedom, and equality do *not* comprise a normative standard that remains somehow separated from an altogether disagreeable social content. Rather, they are afflicted with the injustice and inhumanity “under whose spell they were conceived.”⁵⁰ The truth of normative critique is the untruth of freedom as economic compulsion. It really is the case that the dynamic of the whole process of capital as self-valorising value is fed by the social practices of the class divided individuals who “owe their life to what is being done to them.”⁵¹ Clearly, the civilised regulation of social coldness is much preferable to its authoritarian conduct. Yet, by standing up for the free labourers the normative critique of capitalism endorses the system that compels them in their acquired freedom.

“Thinking means venturing beyond.”⁵² We know the bad; we should know how to avoid it, but we do not know the good. What a human freedom it would be to live life without anxiety and worry about the satisfaction of needs, and with time to spare for enjoyment. In the meantime, despite an immense accumulation of wealth, the poor and miserable continue to “chew words to fill their bellies.”⁵³

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- ⁵⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Shierry Weber Nichol森 and Samuel Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 66.
- ⁵¹ Theodor Adorno, “Society,” trans. F. R. Jameson, in *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, ed. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas MacKay Kellner (London: Routledge, 1989), 275.
- ⁵² Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973), 2. For an appreciation of Bloch’s Marxism, see Cat Moir, “Ernst Bloch: The Principle of Hope,” in Best, Bonefeld, and O’Kane, *SAGE Handbook*, 199–215.
- ⁵³ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. Edmund F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 102. On the lack of access to basic material things in our time, see Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017). It now goes under the name of “cost-of-living crisis.” See “Cost of Living Crisis,” *Financial Times*, last modified June 19, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/cost-of-living-crisis>. That is, instead of a social condition of capitalist wealth, it is treated as an unfortunate social situation.

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