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Hans-Georg Backhaus
Dialektik der Wertform: Untersuchungen zur marxischen Ökonomiekritik
An extended book review

[The Dialectic of the Value Form: Investigations into Marx's Critique of Economics]
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This is an impressive and long-overdue book by Hans-Georg Backhaus. Right through from the first chapter, 'The Dialectics of the Value Form', first published in 1969, to the last chapter, 'The logical Misery of Economic Theory', written in 1997, the account on Marx's work shows Backhaus as one of the most intriguing Marxist scholars. His depth of knowledge and insight is both revealing and, if I may, saddening. There is no doubt that since the revival of Marxist scholarship in the 1960s, Marxism has regressed with its assimilation to various forms of bourgeois thought. Such assimilation like that represented, for example, by 'Regulation Theory', 'Critical Realism', 'Quantitative Marxism', and 'Analytical Marxism', can not be found in his work. Backhaus is a heretic thinker who has not let himself be taken in by those 'Times' that, time and time again, proclaim themselves as 'New'. His book shows what can be achieved if Marx's critique of political economy is studied seriously and if 'economic science' and social thought-experiments associated with positivism, including its 'critical' offsprings, are confronted with the question: What is capital? Backhaus' project is to ask questions. His questions to Marx, and his critique of political Review economy, focus on the discovery of the essential social relations that the commodity presents in perverted form.

Within the CSE, especially during the 1970's debate on value, Backhaus' work appeared indispensable. Yet, only two contributions by Backhaus have appeared in English. The first was his 1969 article 'The Dialectics of the Value Form' (*Thesis Eleven*, vol. 1, 1980); the second his essay 'Between Philosophy and Science: Marxian Social Theory as Critical Theory' (published in Bonefeld, et al., *Open Marxism*, Vol. I (Pluto Press, 1992)). The title of his 1992 contribution to *Open Marxism* can be read as a summary of his study. The first chapter of his book, 'On the Beginning of the New Study of Marx' (9-40), written in 1997 as the Preface to the book, contextualises his study in terms of his own intellectual beginning, acknowledging his debt to Adorno and Horkheimer, and expounding his principal critical concern that his reconstruction of the value form addresses. This concern is that of fetishism.

Chapter 2 reprints his 1969 article, 'The dialectic of the value form' (41-64). He shows convincingly that an economic understanding of Marx fails to appreciate the critical dimension of Marx's work, substituting his critique of political economy for a Marxist theory of economics. For Backhaus such a theory reads Marx through the lenses of political economy. However, it is not just that the 'interpreters' misread Marx but, also, that Marx himself invited such misreading because of his attempt at popularising *Kapital* by hiding his dialectical method.ⁱ This 'hiding', for Backhaus, has had profound consequences for the proper appreciation of the destructive and that is emancipatory dimension of Marx's critique of political economy. For Backhaus, the dialectics of the value form holds the key for critical reconstruction of Marx's work.

The following chapter, 'Materials for the Reconstruction of Marx's Theory of Value' (67-227) is in four parts, written between 1974 and 1978/79. The fourth part is published here for the first time. In these parts, Backhaus supplies a devastating critique of bourgeois economic thought and its Marxist variants. His assessment of political economy focuses on the relationship between value theory and money theory, a relationship that for him is an internal one. This sets him apart from most Marxist commentators. He charges

that the dialectics of the value form holds the key for Marx's conceptualisation of 'money'. Not only in this chapter but throughout his book, he shows with undoubting clarity and force that an economic Marxism is a contradiction in terms.

The chapter 'On Marx's Revolutionising and Critique of Economics: the Determination of his Object as a Totality of „perverted Forms‘, (299-333), first published in 1984, develops his concerns with Marx's critique of economic categories on two fronts. The first concerns the critical relationship between 'unreflected presuppositions', on the one hand, and the issue of 'prepositing action' (*voraussetzendes Tun*), on the other.ⁱⁱ Backhaus charges, with Marx, that economic thought, including its sociological and philosophical offsprings, depends on assumptions that are treated as 'givens' and thus as untheorised presuppositions. For example, 'capital' is presupposed as a given and as such a given 'used' as a base for deriving other things such as 'price', value-standard, store of value etc... Such logical deductions finish up conceptually where they started: capital is capital and vice versa! In contrast, the notion of 'prepositing action', although not fully developed by Backhaus, asks what is capital; better: why does human purposeful social practice take the form of capital? This last points emphasises the second 'front' of his critique which focuses on the relationship between value 'in itself and what Marx's called the 'perverted form' of value. Value 'in itself is, of course, the conception of value as an economic thing. The conception of value as a perverted form, in contrast, demystifies the existence of value as such a thing 'in itself by showing its social, and therewith, human constitution. In short, following Backhaus, the value form is conceptualised as a perverted form of human practice, whose existence appears, with necessity, as a thing in-itself. This is because, as Backhaus shows, social labour is constituted in such a way that it has no consciousness of itself, a consciousness that, instead, appears to be the property of the product of human purposeful activity: the life of the commodity.

His 'Money as a Constituence or A priori of Economic Objectivation' (335-398), first published in 1986, develops his critique of 'unreflected presuppositions' through a critique of bourgeoisie conceptions of money, emphasising Marx's conceptualisation of 'money' in value theoretical terms. The chapter 'Aspects of Marx's Category of Critique' (399-419), first published in 1989, deals with the issue of 'perverted forms' through an analysis of the 'social constitution' of economic categories. He argues convincingly that Marx's critique of political economy shows the futility of criticising economics from within the framework, or from the standpoint of economics. For Backhaus, the destructive dimension of Marx's critique of political economy is entailed in the 'reduction' of economic categories to 'relationships between humans' and that is to social relations. Backhaus argues with compelling vigour and impressive scholarship that the separation of 'constitution' from 'existence' constitutes the blind spot of dogmatic thought; better: vulgar thought, however critical the posture of such dogmatism.

The importance of the issue of 'social constitution' is developed further in 'On the Potential of Critique in Marx's Analysis' (421-430), first published in 1990. In this chapter, he supplies a critique of attempts that seek to determine the essence of 'things' on the basis of 'immediacy'. 'Immediacy', of course, refers to the 'existence' (*Dasein*) of economic categories, that is their existence as things in-themselves – the raw sense-data of social existence upon which bourgeois respectfulness, be it in terms of political economy or positivist thought, rests and feeds. As a consequence, the question 'what is „capital“' can not be answered: it appears either to have been installed into our social world by God's order or, as today's secularised versions of the 'invisible', such as Critical Realism, have it, through the emergence of capital out of nature. In distinction to such perverted forms of thought.ⁱⁱⁱ Backhaus shows that for Marx theoretical mysteries find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice, however perverted this practice might be. His conception, then, of the dialectics of the value form amounts to the dialectics of 'constitution' and 'existence'. The fetishism of the commodity means, then, that capitalist social relations exist *necessar-*

ily as relations between things at the same time as these necessary relations are those constituted in and through human social practice. In short, the existence of the world occurs behind the backs of the social individual, yet it is her work.

The last chapter, 'The Logical Misery of Economies' (431-500), written in 1997, renews his critique of immediacy and unreflected presuppositions in economic thought. He shows that the espousal of economic categories as things 'in-themselves' leads either to a vicious circularity of presuppositions or to an infinite regress of meta-theories, seeking to discover the practical meaning of invisible principles. The problems that economic thought poses can, for Backhaus, not be resolved by economic theory. Their resolution requires the critique of economic categories and that is the summoning of reason as a critical theory. Such summoning is the commission of philosophy. Hence he insists that Marx's critique of political economy amounts to a critical theory and that is a theory against the false totality that the commodity presents and upon whose 'existence' [*Dasein*] economic categories rest, rendering economics a science without scientific foundations. Its science is that of perverted forms. The world of the commodity, although real, is constituted in and through human social practice which subsists through the enchanted world of capital in the mode of being denied. Backhaus, then, argues that Marx's critique of political economy is situated between philosophy and science. For him, the dialectic of the value form holds the key to the Marxian revolution. The book concludes with an appendix based on notes Backhaus took in 1962 of a seminar-lecture by Adorno.^{iv} These notes read like a research proposal on the dialectics of the value form, a proposal that Backhaus took seriously. The present volume is the outcome. Backhaus' book is highly recommended.

Notes

- ⁱ On this see also the contribution by Helmut Reichelt to *Open Marxism vol. III: Emancipating Marx*, (Pluto Press, 1995).
- ⁱⁱ On this see K. Psychopedis' „Dialectical Theory: Problems of Reconstruction“, in *Open Marxism vol. I: Dialectics and History* (Pluto Press, 1992).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. A. Sohn-Rethel, *Warenform and Denkform*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt, 1978
- ^{iv} An English version of these Notes is forthcoming shortly in *Common Sense*.