MARXISM AND THE CRITIQUE OF VALUE

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Abstract

The article discusses the first book length appearance in English of the German group *Wertkritik*, by unpacking its grounding presuppositions and then critically scrutinizing its practical and political implications.

Keywords: critique of value, value-form, Marx, esoteric Marxism, Wertkritik, Krisis, Exit!

The volume edited by Neil Larsen, Mathias Nilges, Josh Robinson, Nicholas Brown[2]is is the first book length appearance in English of the German Marxist group *Wertkritik*. The group assembles a number of theoreticians gathered around the magazine *Krisis*, which split in 2004 into the two groups (and corresponding magazines) *Krisis*and *Exit!*. Since the reasons for this divorce are just as much personal as they are theoretical (the latter having to dowith the 'value-dissociation theory', adopted as personal coat of arms by the *Exit!* gang), the editors of the volume have preferred emphasizing the common ground of the two factions, instead of what separates them. The programmatic return to an 'esoteric Marx' and the critique of value preached by the *Wertkritik's*personnel has its intellectual predecessors in the works of Isaac Rubin, EvgenyPashukanis, late Adorno, H.G. Backhaus and, more recently, MoishePostone, and is articulated in a constant opposition to 'traditional' and 'academic Marxism' (which comprise basically the whole Marxist intellectual and political tradition, except the authors named above, the members of the Wertkritik and, perhaps, some parts – not that many – of Marx himself). Also excluded from this true Marxism is a rival German current, the *Neue Marx Lecture*, which – even though it shares with the *Wertkritik*the emphasis on the importance of the form of value and of fundamental, categorical critique –is nevertheless guilty of placing too much weight on money and exchange, as essential participants in the laboratory of value.

The first part of the book lays out the fundamentals of the *Wertkritik*. Its almost obsessive starting point of reference is the first chapter from Marx's *Capital*, and more exactly the analysis of the *form* of value. The emphasis on the form of value is meant to highlight and recuperate from oblivion what separates Marx's approach – the *critique* of political economy – from the classical political economy of value (Smith, Ricardo). While the focus on the *content* of value, as relevant as it is, will always confine itself to an economic matter, and usually ends up in a deadlock in Marxism in the issue of the correct 'transformation'of values into prices, the focus on the *form* of value is able to revive the

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[2]Neil Larsen, Mathias Nilges, Josh Robinson, Nicholas Brown (eds.), *Marxism and the Critique of Value,* M-C-M', Chicago-Alberta, 2014.

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multidimensional critique of capitalism articulated by Marx, in which value is not to be read only as an economic category, signifying the amount of social labor contained in a commodity; but also, and more importantly, as a social form, expressing (in an oblique way) the abstract and impersonal socialization of society – the blind mechanism by means of which private labor becomes social labor.Value is thus a 'total category', encompassing all aspects of social life in capitalism – hence, the diverse and far reaching application of this theoretical core in the texts of the *Wertkritik*.

From this reading of Marx's 'esoteric' critique of value – an 'esoteric' side which presumably was lost also to Marx on a number of occasions – spurs an original account on the nature of labor in capitalism: labor should no longer be seen, as in traditional, 'workerist' Marxism, as the natural opposite of capital, as an anhistorical fountain of social richness, whose real potential is merely corrupted and fettered in capitalism, but as thoroughly articulated by the social dynamic of value and, thus, at most, as a mere internal dissenter to capitalism. Hence, anti-capitalism should not point towards the traditional utopia of the socialism of 'real value', in which labor is emancipated from its capitalist framework and value is restored to its proper measure, without the corruption of surplus value, but towards the overcoming of all the basic capitalist categories: value, labor, and money.

The historical relevance of this otherwise merely conceptual development becomes highly visible once this theoretical nucleus is coupled with an updated theory of the falling rate of profit due to the change in the organic composition of capital, in which Marx's thesis is seen as already confirmed by the post-Fordist capitalist dynamic and, most of all, by the third industrial revolution – the microelectronic revolution. Once this step is taken, the abstract critique of value becomes almost spontaneously a historical theory of crisis. In the sharp summary made byTrenkle, 'since the 1970, as a result of a worldwide, absolute displacement of living labor power from the process of valorization, capital has reached the historical limits of its power to expand" (p. 13). This 'absolute logical and historical limit of capital… as a consequence of the most recent and qualitatively new stage of capitalist socialization' (p. 19) is further spelled out by Robert Kurz's classic article from 1986, 'The Crisis of Exchange Value'. The 'scientification of production' – a variation on Marx's General Intellect – has brought to an extreme the original contradiction between use value and exchange value, which appears today as the radical divergence between an ever diminishing pool of productive labor (in terms of value production), which is social only as a-socially mediated in exchange, and an ever growing pool of directly social labor, which is the material basis of the former but is nevertheless excluded from the production of value. Value thus becomes 'an empty shell that no longer measures up to the material content' and whose reproduction is more and more in opposition to society's own reproduction and development. This 'crisis of the creation of value itself', 'final crisis of capitalism', cannot be dealt with in the manner of traditional Marxist crisis theories, which allegedly have not moved beyond an horizon immanent to value, but requires a radical critique of the fundamental capitalist categories – even if the

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article still puts some faith in the subjective element of 'social labor' as alternative to capitalism, faith that would be dropped in later texts by Kurz and his *Wertkritik* fellows.

The second part of the volume revolves around the so called 'value-dissociation theory', articulated, after 2004, by RoswithaScholz, Robert Kurz and the *Exit!* group. This theory aims at adding a 'feminist twist' to the fundamental assertions of value-critique, by postulating – as a necessary precondition of the value constellation – a dissociation between a masculine sphere of value-production, and a feminine sphere of social reproduction, roughly covering the opposition and mutual implication ('conflictual incompatibility that shapes the commodity-producing patriarchy as such') of economy and culture. While not accounted in the production of value, the feminine sphere offers the material basis for the former: all the affective, emotional work, the practices of sharing and giving, and the space of intimacy which, although not quantifiable in the crude rationalism of value, are its invisible pillars of reproduction, the included excluded that ensures the sustainability of it all. In the words of RoswithaScholz, 'value dissociation means that capitalism contains a core of female-determined reproductive activities and the affects, characteristics and attitudes… that are dissociated from value and abstract labor… Such relations constitute a facet of capitalist societies that cannot be captured by Marx's conceptual apparatus… [yet] is a necessary aspect of value, [which] exists outside of it and is its precondition' (pp. 127-8). Thus, the relation between value and dissociation is at least double. On the one hand, dissociation seems to be the symmetrical positive of value, that the latter must somehow include as excluded in its own mechanism in order to reproduce itself. On the other hand, dissociation seems to stand in for a whole new and deeper level of grounding abstraction for the entire critique of value, 'as the macrotheoretical framework within which the categories of the value form function micro-theoretically'. From this shifting and highly sophisticated perspective, the author nevertheless manages to throw in some direct punches, in such flat diagnostics as 'the very basis of the modern state and politics, along with the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, rests since the eighteenth century upon the foundation of male alliances" (p. 131). Similar pattern for Trenkle's piece included in the same section, which, after initially identifying, via a most traditional move, masculinity with abstraction and a relation to the world mediated by instrumental objects, and femininity with sensuality and a relation to the world based on spontaneous communion, obviously discovers that the capitalist production of value corresponds to the masculine side, and is based on a repressed feminine side.

It is a bit curious that this intellectual platform, which usually claims to explain everything from the origin of capitalism to its ultimate crisis in our days solely on the basis of chapter 1 of *Capital I* and chapter 15 of *Capital III*, feels nevertheless the need to accommodate one, and only one, theoretical graft – the theory of value-dissociation. And not in order to bring morehistorical mediation and concreteness to its account of modern society, but, on the contrary, in order to project another, deeper, level of founding abstraction – the precondition of capitalism which is the dissociation between masculine

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and feminine. It is, perhaps, a sign of chivalrous gallantry from the part of the Marxist hardcore of the Wertkritik to welcome this 'feminist twist' that manages to carve out for itself quite a fundamental and structuring position in the whole theoretical architectonic, as nothing less than a precondition and founding theory for all the critique of value. However, no good deed goes unpunished and the unstable theoretical mixture resulting from this is the price to pay.Why, after all, the need to bring in a whole new different theory, if this theory simply projects a symmetrical background, 'dark underbelly' as they call it, to all the discussion on value, strongly moralizes the whole argument, and, last but not least, fixes the whole conceptual apparatus in the good old essentialist sexual opposition (with value, reason, instrumentality on the wrong, masculine side of history, and affects, intimacy and gratuity on the good, feminine side of it). Rather than a historical reading of the 'anhistorical' categories of male and female, in which these are to be seen as social constructs in the process of modern capitalism, the value-dissociation theory does the opposite move, in which the historical dynamic of capitalism is projected onto the anhistorical background of the reified and essentialist opposition between the two sexes. This probably would not be that problematic if the feminine would not thus turn to occupy, in this theory, exactly the role and function from which the good old traditional concept of labor was evacuated as a false antagonist by the very same *Wertkritik*: namely, the genuine, natural and original opposition to capitalism, which is somehow brutally exploited by capital even if it survives as pure as ever, and which has only to be liberated by removing the masculine fetters of value. Would not than the whole critique of 'traditional' and 'workerist' Marxism apply just as well to the 'value dissociation theory'? Why explain the historical dynamic of capitalism by summoning the traditional essentialist opposition between male and female, all the more so if, at the same time, the authors openly acknowledge that in today's capitalism this gender opposition is more and more blurred – again, couldn't one make the same argument regarding the emancipatory potential of labor and workerism, which survives even if all sharp oppositions to capital and old class structures have all but vanished?

The third part of the book focuses on some of the contemporary political consequences of the critique of the value-form. Lohoff points to the necessary role of the state in the overarching apparatus of value, and, from this basis, explains the contemporary crisis of politics as an expression of the crisis of value production, while at the same time rejects all appeals to the state as a possible remedy or cushion to capital's rule – what we need, instead, is an emancipatory politics that should not focus on the defense of the state, but on imagining forms of social socializations, based on free access, and, of course, 'the gradual decommodification and demonetarization of social relationships, and the transition to a production of wealth that is directly socialized' (p. 181) Kurz's essay in this section follows instead a value-critique reading of our recent monetary history, from the Bretton Woods agreements to today's hegemony of the 'arms dollar', and also calls for an emancipatory politics that consists in a 'redefinition of socialism beyond the fetish forms of commodity, money, nation and their associated

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gender relations'. Finally, Trenkle's piece revisits the issue of class struggle, which is to be abandoned as salvation front not only because workers' struggle is, in truth, immanent to the value constellation, but also because of the wide-scale phenomenon of 'declassing' and class decomposition. The political solution is instead identified in struggles such as those of the Zapatistas, the Piqueteros and other contemporary grass-roots movements.

What is striking in this section is how, on the one hand, almost all existing alternatives for emancipatory politics are dismissed as not radical and far reaching enough, as not moving beyond the fetish of value and not being sufficiently profound and structural, while at the same time various local, subjective and voluntaristic endeavors are granted the much praised emancipatory politics award. Strange how such a totalizing, structural reading manages to make place for such voluntaristic, local alternatives. Apparently, subjective voluntarism is out of place only in the workers movement, while it is enjoying a comeback in all postmodern forms of resistance.

The fourth part of the book represents the lowest point in *Wertkritik's* display, the critique of modernity and Enlightenment. It is hard to imagine that such an esoteric, sophisticated Marxism can arrive, on its own account, at such one-dimensional and obscurantist conclusions. Why all the effort of rediscovering the hidden Marx, if in his place one simply finds Burke or DeMaistre? Lohoff: 'the unpleasant, sickly-sweet smell rising from these principles [Liberty, Fraternity, Equality] turns out to be an effluvium of intermingled death and murder" (226). "The disease that Western values are supposed to remedy is, as a rule, the product of the cure itself. Destruction, murder, and chaos are themselves constitutive of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity" (p. 228).Kurz, following close by: "Modern bourgeois freedom… is identical to a higher, abstract, and anonymous form of servitude". (288); "in modernity, equality itself is a relation of domination" (p. 289). And closing the section, Lewed, who identifies in the threat of Islamism and in the discourse of Osama bin Laden – obviously – the same deadly germ of Enlightenment called 'the abstract universality of the public interest' (314).

As surprising as this conservative critique of modernity is, one has to admit that its possibility was always already quite present in the starting theoretical positions of the *Wertkritik*. There is a very quick slippery slope from the valid main argument of the Wertkritik – not simply the old refrain of the evacuation of the concrete and its domination by the abstract, the conservative complaint that the general suffocates the particular, but the more specific idea that abstraction as such exists alongside material things in capitalism and governs blindly the social relations – back to a one-dimensional and ahistorical reading, very similar to the reactionary conservatism of Heidegger, of blaming modernity and abstraction as such. The sheer scope of value-critique, reaching into all domains of social life on the basis of a rather slim conceptual apparatus, makes it vulnerable to being turned into a rather vague feeling about the decadence of the world from its enchanted old ways to the cold waters of modern reason and interests: if value defines not only the economic mode of production, but everything related to modernity, than prehistory must be our lost utopia, the much longed for horizon beyond value.

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Unfortunately, this slippery slope is one on which the *Wertkritik*embarks full-heartedly and quite programmatically.

The Heideggerian and extreme conservative tone of these articles will prepare the reader for the final section of the book, in which the passage beyond capitalism will turn out to require nothing less than an 'ontological break' with everything that exists. Here, again, we encounter the same oscillation between a radical critique that can hope only in a world beyond – beyond money, value, labor – and an unexpectedly moderate and pragmatic opening to praxis, which can cling only to partial, subjective, voluntaristic efforts at emancipation.

Perhaps, this problematic oscillation when it comes to emancipatory praxis is an effect of the initial conceptualstrategy of the *Wertkritik*, the coupling of the theory of the value-form with the theory of the ultimate capitalist crisis brought by the growing organic composition of capital. There is, perhaps, too much and too few precision in the diagnostic that capitalism has reached its limit with the advent of the informatics revolution. There is a bit of lack of historical accuracy in situating the end-point of capitalism somewhere around 50 years ago, for a phenomenon that barely covers two full centuries. How to account for this unending 'time that remains' after the end of time?There is a strong need for mediating theories between this transhistorical history – the ascension and demise of value – and real, actual history. But there is also the problem of how to articulate the conceptual apparatus ofvalue-critique theory with these mediating theories. The value-dissociation solution does not offer a great example. Thus, because of its own sweeping ambitions, *Wertkritik*seems to be trapped in the drama of the proverbial elephant in the jewel store: when pointing to solutions, it can only resurrect the same voluntarist alternatives that it logically had to reject; when left on its own, it can only express itself in highly abstract and, as it were, historical but not yet real accounts of modern society, pureprophetism, eventually bursting out in flat and onedimensionalobscurantist denunciations of modern decadence; when coupled with another theory, it is the all-encompassing and sweeping range of the *Wertkritik*that makes the assemblage look like an improvised patchwork. Yet surely, after all, this strange, irreducible inadequacy is characteristic to all prophetic yet ante festum discourses: to put in Adornian-Heideggerian speech, in false times, truth can only appear in odd disguises.

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