

ON THE DIALECTICS OF THE VALUE-FORM

Hans-Georg Backhaus

Translators' Introduction

The following article, which appears here for the first time in English¹, is an offspring of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt school. In it, however, Critical Theory becomes visible in a way which to those who have come to know Critical Theory in the framework of the recent renaissance of interest in Habermas (and, to a lesser extent, in Adorno and Horkheimer) in the anglo-saxon world, may be entirely unrecognisable². Hans-George Backhaus first put forward publicly his reflections in 1965 as a paper in seminars of Adorno³ (Sociology/Philosophy) and Fetscher⁴ (Politics) in Frankfurt. Central ideas reappear with Krahl⁵, a colleague of Backhaus, who later became the spokesperson for the SDS within the anti-authoritarian and anti-capitalist wing of the West-German Students Movement. Although the Students Movement as mass movement soon came to a standstill and dissolved, it gave rise to a multitude of marxist political-theoretical groups which picked up the threads of the marxist theoretical tradition, which in West-Germany had been profoundly torn by Nazism, Stalinism and the Cold War⁶. During the fifties and early sixties, when marxist politics were at a low ebb⁷, the main popularisers of marxism in Germany were humanist christians such as the Jesuit, Father Wetter, who wrote *Dialectical Materialism*, and the Evangelical Academy, which took up the 'young Marx'. Marx's critique of capitalist economy, however, remained undiscussed.

Backhaus' article marks the new beginning⁸ of serious study and research of Marx, which perhaps reached the height and breadth of preoccupation with Marx in the first quarter of the century. (After the passing of the euphoria over the Russian Revolution and after the experience of the German 'revolutionary confusion' between 1919 and 1923, Critical Theory had formed in Frankfurt, which was then already a centre for the left⁹.)

A younger colleague of Horkheimer and Adorno, Alfred Schmidt, edited a collection of articles, including Backhaus', which were published in 1969 under the somewhat misleading title "Marxist Epistemology". Together with Rosdolsky's book on the *Grundrisse*, which appeared in 1968, the value-form analytical considerations of Backhaus inspired a series of works on the 'logic of *Capital*'. Besides the very direct stimulus for the Frankfurt comrades, Krahl and Reichelt¹⁰, 'On the Dialectics of the Value-form' provoked vital first impulses for the many newly-founded political-theoretical groups in other places which

were occupied with *Capital* and the derivation of the bourgeois state out of the capital-analysis¹¹.

The journals, *Sozialistische Politik*, *Probleme des Klassenkampfes*, *Mehrwert* and *Leviathan* sprang up, which partly (*Mehrwert* and *Leviathan*, at least), however, remained captive to the traditional interpretations which ignore the value-form analysis. Another journal, *Gesellschaft. Beiträge zur Marxschen Theorie*, was founded on the initiative of Backhaus. In it he has published further reflections under the title 'Materialien zur Rekonstruktion der Marxschen Werttheorie'¹². His 'On the Dialectics of the Value-form' has for him a programmatic, thesis-like character and in retrospect seems to require correction in some points¹³.

What are the reasons for publishing this now seemingly outdated article in English? Three short points on this:

1. The reflections on a qualitative analysis of value, which Backhaus sketches, constitute a counterweight to the predominating trend towards mathematisations, led on by the interest in quantitative problems. What Backhaus puts forward when he quotes Joan Robinson can very well be turned against the neo-ricardian Marxists themselves, cf. eg. Ian Steedman's *Marx after Sraffa*, London 1977. The reader can assess whether the neo-ricardians, there, where they criticise the Marxian value theory, presuppose the identity of Ricardo's and Marx's value theory, as spoken of by Backhaus right at the beginning of his article. Thus, for example, with Steedman we find a genuflection towards the altar of the value-form (Steedman: 1977:20), together with a rejection of what he calls Marx's "value magnitude analysis" (Steedman: 1977:28). The value-form (and its connection with the magnitude of value), however, plays no role whatever in his argumentation¹⁴.

2. Already in the title of Backhaus' article, the unity of content and form, method and object, namely "dialectics and value-form", is expressed. Backhaus demonstrates with the substantive paradoxes of the value-form how formal subsumption logic is inadequate¹⁵ and how the question of a dialectical treatment arises necessarily in the first place. In contrast to orthodox marxism, in which Diamat and Histomat are unified like Old and New Testament as mere canon, and not as a systematic theory, the task of dialectics is, for Backhaus, inseparable from the striving for clarity about the material contradictions of social production by private producers, about the specifically bourgeois form of labour.

3. The thoughts of Backhaus, which bring to the fore the Marxian doubling of commodity into commodity and money, provoke ideas about the specific doubling of bourgeois society into society and state¹⁶. Here, however, the short-circuited conclusion should be

warned against whereby, starting with the attempt of Pashukanis¹⁷, suddenly, without sufficient conceptual mediation, a transition is made in the analysis from simple commodity circulation to right and state.

Backhaus refers directly to the incompleteness and need for reconstructing the value-form argumentation, which, with Marx, comes forward mixed with other elements. Authors who stand uncritically by orthodox marxism in the meantime have taken a liking to such a reconstruction and have carried this out in their own way. Thus the paradox arises that, for example, Haug, in his *Vorlesungen zur Einführung ins 'Kapital'* (Köln 1974) restricts himself to the treatment of the value-form section of the first chapter of *Capital* and consoles the listener/reader with the suggestion that once Marx's method is grasped in relation to the value-form, then the rest follows by itself.

For us, the analysis of the money-form of social labour in capitalism is the first step¹⁸ of an all-encompassing theoretical critique of "modern society", as envisaged by Marx, which shall make the required radicalness of practical revolutionary critique recognisable. This critique is not restricted to the economy, but should go beyond the basis of a completed "Critique of Political Economy" to the (according to the programmatic claim) "superstructure" which grows out of this form-determinate economic basis. This systematic project can therefore only be cashed out when i) the Marxian systematic fragment is reconstructed and ii) the fragment is filled out to system.

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Footnotes to Translators' Introduction

(1) Translated from the original, 'Zur Dialektik der Wertform', in: Schmidt A. (ed.) *Beiträge zur marxistischen Erkenntnistheorie* Frankfurt a.M. 1969. To date the article has been published in Spanish, Japanese, Swedish, Dutch & French. Italian in prep.

(2) Backhaus has told us that, in a conversation with Th. Mohl shortly before his death, Adorno described the value theory as the "most holy estate of Critical Theory" ("das heiligste Gut der Kritischen Theorie"), an insight which Habermas has not taken up in his own theory. Adorno never studied the *Grundrisse* (the quotations in *Negative Dialectics* were given to him by A. Schmidt). His "dialectical phantasy", however, (Adorno spoke frequently of "exact phantasy") led him to programmatic formulations (particularly in the Introduction to *Der Positivismusstreit in der deutschen Soziologie*) which reveal an

intuitive understanding of form problems which can only be concretised by means of form analysis. Habermas, on the other hand, blocks off access to the value-form analysis with his attempt to remould Critical Theory in the direction of communication theory. Thus this analysis finds no place in his *Logik der Sozialwissenschaft*, which appeared in 1967. Only later, in Starnberg, a research institute in Bavaria to which he departed from the Frankfurt student upheavals, has he again taken Marx as his own, but only the economistic Marx, the crisis theoretician, not the value-form theoretician. He took over the *quantitative* value theory and ignored the value-form analysis. Cf. also Roth's criticism of Habermas, 'Mit Marx an Marx vorbei?' (With Marx Against Marx?) in *Ist systematische Philosophie möglich?* S. 583–594, papers presented to the 1975 Hegel Congress in Stuttgart (ed. Dieter Heinrich, Bonn 1977).

(3) It remains to be investigated whether, between the theoretical critique of the "Authoritarian Personality" by Horkheimer/Adorno and the practice of the anti-authoritarians, an inner connection exists which would shed light on both.

(4) Winter Semester, December, 1965.

(5) Hans-Jürgen Krahl died in a car crash in February, 1970. He published 'Zur Wesenslogik der Marxschen Warenanalyse' in *Konstitution und Klassenkampf* Negt ed., Frankfurt a.M. 1971 and *Bemerkungen zum Verhältnis von Kapital und Hegelscher Wesenslogik* Frankfurt a.M. 1970.

(6) It is no wonder that this "picking up" mainly consisted in mere stubborn adherence to classical marxism. This expressed itself in a plethora of Marxist-Leninist groups (the K-Gruppen), a phase which is now well over.

(7) The KPD was banned in 1956. Already in 1953, however, it had become an insignificant political force, as indexed by its paltry 2% vote in the 1953 elections.

(8) In the late sixties, the most widely studied Marxist authors were Sweezy, Mandel, Eduard Marz and W. Hoffmann. All four understand nothing about form and therefore also say nothing about doubling.

(9) cf. Jay *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research* London 1973.

(10) Reichelt H., *Zur logischen Struktur des Kapitalbegriffs bei Karl Marx* Frankfurt a.M. 1970.

(11) The best source of information about the German State Derivation Debate in English is Holloway and Picciotto, *Capital and State. A Marxist Debate* London 1978. It should be noted, however, that one

central paper in this debate, by Flatow and Huisken ('Zum Problem der Ableitung des burgerlichen 'Staates' in: *Prokla* Nr.7 Westberlin Mai 1973), which put forward (in common with the Marxistische Gruppe Erlangen Dec 1972 in: *Cirkular No. 3* 'Zur Oberflache des Kapitals') the position that the derivation has to take as its starting point the "surface of society", is not contained in this collection. Cf. also Margaret A. Fay, Review of *State and Capital* in: *Kapitalistate* No. 7 1978.

(12) Cf. also the forthcoming book by Backhaus *Marx und die marxistische Orthodoxie* Suhrkamp January, 1981.

(13) Backhaus has communicated to us the following view: "Indeed, the necessity of the transition to the third section of the first chapter has not been made clear by Marx, which follows alone from the fact that scarcely anyone has been able to localise the difference between Ricardo and Marx in the third section (it is mostly ignored)." The yardstick of his critique, which the Marcuse quotation in the paper is supposed to communicate (cf n.5), however, is today not acceptable to him. Cf. also 'Materialien zur Rekonstruktion der Marxschen Werttheorie 3' in *Gesellschaft 11* S.111 Footnote 30: "A naive concept of reconstruction of this sort underlay the first two parts of the *Materialien*. It was already employed in the above-cited essay ['Zur Dialektik der Wertform']. In this stands: There remains an urgent priority in Marx research 'to reconstruct out of the more or less fragmentary presentations and the numerous individual remarks strewn throughout other works, the whole of the value theory'." The Berlin group around Joachim Bischoff, Projektgruppe Entwicklung des Marxschen Systems, without acknowledging this Backhausian programmatic statement, nevertheless took it up in their "interpretations of the various outlines" of Marx's value theory in *Das Kapitel vom Geld*, Westberlin 1973. A critique of Backhaus is also contained in it.

(14) Cf. *Marx after Sraffa* p. 14ff for Steedman's justification for why the value-form (amongst other things) does not figure in his book.

(15) Cf. Backhaus' quote from Marx "It is as if . . . *The Animal* existed . . ."

(16) Cf. Eldred/Hanlon/Kleiber/Roth *Die gedoppelte Verdopplung* forthcoming with Campus Verlag, Frankfurt a.M. 1981

(17) Pashukanis E., *Law and Marxism: A general Theory. Towards a Critique of the Fundamental Juridical Concepts* London 1978, with an introduction by Chris Arthur. Arthur is one of the few in the anglo-saxon world to emphasise the value-form, cf. Chris Arthur 'Dialectics of the Value-form' in: Elson D. (ed.) *Value. The Representation of Labour in Capitalism* London 1979.

(18) As well as we could, we have sketched further steps of a value-form analytical appraisal of *Capital* in Eldred/Roth *A Guide to Marx's 'Capital'* London 1978.