

FROM THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL TO
VALUE-FORM ANALYSIS*

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The preoccupation with problems of capital-analysis began relatively early. We wanted to know in the first place what 'reification' (*Verdinglichung*) really is. At that time in the mid-sixties we systematically plagued Horkheimer with these things. We wanted to know how they are interpreted in the framework of the Frankfurt Theory — since the Frankfurt Theory built explicitly on them — and discovered after all, that after three sentences long silences set in, and that basically there was very little to learn from these theoreticians. Finally, we decided to think these questions through ourselves and — this can now be said in the present company — had to conclude that the omission of these moments itself had to be conceived as to a certain extent symptomatic with regard to the critique of this 'Critical Theory'. This becomes evident when one pursues it further, if one may extrapolate, with Habermas. One could perhaps put forward the thesis that the Habermasian theory, which after all arose in a close connection with the Frankfurt theory, is to be designated as dialectical theory which can only develop dialectical theory formally, since it falls back to the standpoint of the bourgeois subject.

Precisely that, however, is already implicitly criticised, I would suggest, in Marx's form-analysis, i.e. in the value-form analysis, money-form analysis and in the dialectical presentation of the categories of political economy. This implies that something like 'dialectical theory' as method extracted from these contents cannot be explicated. This, however, has always been the thesis of the Frankfurt theory. When one for example reads the writings of Alfred Schmidt, it is striking that he says that the dialectical method cannot be explicated in isolation from the contents. When one ties him down, however: Tell us, why don't you, what is so special about these contents, show us the dialectical method with these contents themselves, e.g. with certain dialectical transitions in *Capital*: normally he gives it a miss, or at least to date that has been the case. He was not in the position to develop the dialectical method in *Capital* himself. To date, no one¹ in Frankfurt has tried this, as far as I can see. To Habermas, these matters are totally alien, today more than ever, one would have to say.²

When we had come a bit further, we noticed that Adorno characteristically pricked up his ears as we were confronted with these questions. As soon as he heard such explicitly dialectical formulations, as are to be found on almost every page of the *Grundrisse*, he developed a certain taste for the thing, but he was probably too old to follow it further.

Well, that's how it all began — this preoccupation with the form-analysis — and if one wants to assess what could happen in the future,³ that's very difficult to say, because intra-theoretically one can say that the dialectical method proceeding from this value-form analysis makes the claim to be a method in which form and content cannot be separated from one another, and also to solve intra-theoretical problems which bourgeois economics cannot solve. This means, roughly speaking, that the standpoint of the bourgeois subject is to be seen in the fact that the bourgeois theoretician simply picks up the form externally and him/herself remains captive of this 'picked up' form. These are really clichés, but it seems to me to be sensible to repeat them once more, since Backhaus' work is a concretisation of these questions. By contrast, Marx's theory, as dialectical, positive science, makes the claim to clearly conceptualise for the first time something which can be called the social totality.⁴ By dialectical theory is to be understood a dialectical development of categories in the sense of an "immanent going-beyond-itself", if we may employ formulations which Marx used in the *German Ideology*. As opposed to this, bourgeois theory is to be criticised from the standpoint of the 'bourgeoisness' of its theory building in the sense of a world-historical restriction of knowledge, which is itself anchored in the structure of the reproduction process. From this standpoint, one can in turn interpret this dialectical presentation as a systematic phenomenology of the restrictions to knowledge (*Erkenntnisrestringierungen*). That is, the totality of the forms of consciousness or forms of perception of the bourgeois subject is itself to be positively developed in the course of this dialectical presentation. Strictly speaking, we would have a two-stand argumentation: on the one hand what we have just called "positive science", borrowing a formulation from the *German Ideology*, and on the other, simultaneously a critique of the forms of knowledge and positive presentation of the bourgeois subject.⁵

What is the sense of discussing and coming to an understanding of these problems when that which has been written down in *Capital* is already one hundred years old? Does *Capital*, to speak plainly, have any validity 'for our problems'? To answer this question very briefly: We find plenty of indications that in bourgeois society certain basic problems are ever-present. With his form of presentation, Marx makes the claim, in my opinion, to have presented the essence, that is, the basic structure, of capitalism. This means that this form of presentation is valid for as long as the object which is presented in the form of presentation itself exists. Now, capitalism hasn't disappeared, but let us suppose it were to do so. With the disappearance of the object, so too would the method of presentation of this object disappear. It is a matter of a method on recall insofar as it forms its concepts only from the standpoint of the dissolution (*Aufhebung*) of that which is to be conceptualised.

What are the critical, epistemological implications of such a statement, that this method only has validity for as long as the object presented in this form itself exists? Of course, one cannot consider this in an abstractly epistemological

way. Rather, one must develop this with the presentation itself. This presentation, however, would present itself, starting from the first steps which lie before us, as a subject-object inversion in the sense that here, in the form of the development of economic categories, which are themselves objective forms of expression of definite social relations, something like a social efflorescence (*Naturwuechsigkeit*) is presented; in the sense that here something is produced by humans, comes about through their consciousness, and at the same time "behind the backs of these individuals" as a 'natural' process. ("Behind the backs of these individuals" is indeed one of those ever-recurring formulations which we find in Hegel and in the Frankfurt theory, but which has never been explicated as a materialist clarification of that which Hegel calls *Weltgeist*.) This 'natural' process is to be understood as an overhang of social objectivity which is made by humans themselves, who are then fully subjected to this process. That is, we have this form of efflorescence the whole time, which propagates itself — we hope, for not too much longer — and for precisely as long as this overhang of objectivity propagates itself, this method of presentation is valid.

Let us turn to the dialectical method of presentation itself. One finds isolated formulations in *Capital* in which Marx points out that it is a matter of humans without any individuality, of character-masks, of bearers of definite social relations, and that means 'dialectic', namely, as a portrait of this abstract negation of individuals, which is itself brought about by humans. Marx presents the humans themselves only insofar as they have intercourse with one another as character-masks. Insofar as they come into relation with one another as individuals, they are not the object of the theory. Insofar as they act as individuals, they withdraw from the building of theory in this specific sense; there they anticipate something which still has to be constructed.⁶ In *Capital* therefore Marx deals only with categories in the sense of objective expressions of social relations. He talks of categories as the Other of bearers without individuality, of character-masks. In a certain sense, we find here the first formulation of the concept of role, although in a quite different light from that in which it is served up by role theory.

This is just a short, unsystematic introduction, so that we can appreciate the perspective in which the problems are to be taken up, and from which perspective they have arisen, so that, in turn, we can see that it is here not a matter of an economic conceptual interpretation. The thesis for the whole reflections is the following: that only on the background of all these questions which I have only enigmatically hinted at can the meaning of Marx's critique of political economy be revealed.

* The above is an informal introduction by Helmut Reichelt to a talk on 'Value-form Analysis' given by Hans-Georg Backhaus at Konstanz University on 15 June, 1972. (Materials of the Konstanz research project 'Karl Marx' 48/71 1971-74 led by V. M. Roth.) Translated from the German transcript of the tape recording of the talk and slightly edited by Michael Eldred. May 1981.

Translator's Notes

1. At this time Reichelt had already published his *Zur logischen Struktur des Kapitalbegriffs bei Karl Marx*, Frankfurt, 1970. Since then Backhaus has published his 'Materialien zur Rekonstruktion der Marxschen Werttheorie' Parts 1, 2 and 3 in *Gesellschaft* Nos. 1, 3 and 11.
2. In his most recent work, Habermas settles the question of value-form analysis with the following brief words: "Marx analyses the double form of the commodity as use-value and exchange-value and the transformation of its natural form into the value-form with the aid of the Hegelian concept of abstraction, whereby use-value and exchange-value relate to one another as essence and appearance. Today this causes us difficulties because we cannot employ the non-reconstructed fundamental concepts of the Hegelian logic without circumspection: the extended discussion of the relation of Marx's *Capital* to Hegel's *Logic* has thrown light on these difficulties rather than solved them. I will therefore go no further into the form-analysis." (Habermas *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* Vol. 1 Frankfurt 477f). The postulation of the relation of use-value to exchange-value as one of essence to appearance is already a highly dubious interpretation of the Marxian texts. More generally, it is to be noted that Habermas, who has proposed a reconstruction of historical materialism in which a theory of capitalism would form a sub-theory (cf. Roth 'With Marx Against Marx' in *Thesis Eleven* No. 3 1982), now also promulgates the necessity of reconstructing Hegelian categories before a reconsideration of the Marxian capital-analysis could be undertaken. The winner of the Hegel prize himself, however, does not venture to reinterpret the Hegelian *Logic*, nor its relationship to *Capital*. His own proposed foundation for a social theory is a theory of communicative action constituted from diverse ingredients.
3. Cf. Translators' Introduction to Backhaus 'On the dialectics of the Value-Form' in *Thesis Eleven* No. 1 1980, 94-98.
4. It should be kept in mind that Marx's *Capital* is only the first systematic part of an attempt to conceptualise the bourgeois social totality.
5. In my view, it is not a matter of a *simultaneous* systematic presentation, but rather of a presentation which, on the basis of a "positive science" of the value-forms, comes systematically later to a conceptualisation of bourgeois subjectivity and ideological forms of knowledge.
6. It is correct to cling theoretically to the fact that in the capital-analysis humans are theorised as character-masks without individuality. But the phrase "they anticipate something which still has to be constructed" can be interpreted to mean that any expression of individuality is already an anticipation of socialism, which I would regard as false. Interpreted, however, as a "construction" which still has to be performed in theory, the statement seems to me correct. There is namely a certain room for the play of subjectivity in bourgeois society, even in the realm of the economy. It is the task of the competition-analysis to conceptualise the economic subjectivity of the subjects of competition in its systematic relation to the value-form categories. With this, however, the thematisation of subjectivity is not complete, since the separated "realm of freedom", the private sphere, in which the individuality of subjects comes to expression, still has to be theorised. Cf. the forthcoming paper in *Thesis Eleven*, 'The Ego's Irresolvable Dilemma' by Marnie Hanlon.