

Introduction: Critique of Political Economy

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It is 2016, and we are still living under capitalism. Yet, how does contemporary capitalism function? How is it possible for a system, which declared its final victory in the beginning of the last decade of the previous century, to already face some of its most serious and profound crisis since the first decade, of the present century? The on-going crisis has re-opened some of the (half) forgotten and prematurely answered questions about the modes in which capitalism operates: the relation between the State and capital, the limits of capital, the forms of changes within capitalism, forms of domination and exploitation, social classes, et cetera.

Louis Althusser seems to have been correct to argue that “one cannot see everything from everywhere,” and that, therefore, certain philosophical positions are more apt to give us a perspective on the totality than others – as they for example allow for grasping the constitutive divisions of a society. For this reason, it also seems that today there is still no better standpoint from which to grasp the heterogeneous field of Marxism in its totality than the one delineated by the expression that occurs as subtitle to *Das Kapital*: “a critique of political economy”. Yet, depending on which element of this brief expression we choose to emphasise, a different articulation of Marxism also appears.

For those who affirm that the essential component of the formula is the “critique,” *Capital* is regarded as a work of destruction of political economy as such, opening the field – through a harsh critique of the presentation of the capitalist mode of production, and its ideology, bourgeois political economy – to a form of pure politics, separated from economic domination. For others, “critique” might assume a more Kantian sense, transforming Marx’s work into a foray concerning the immanent antinomies that lie at the heart of capitalism, where politics and economy intertwine in impossible ways.

For those who consider that Marx’s innovation in fact lies in the “political” element, the role of critique rather lies in the demonstration that there is no such thing as a pure economy – no neutral or contingent “forces of the market” - but rather class struggle, a historical and social divide that widens and perpetuates itself through the very form of value, in its different shapes and shapings. Stressing the political dimension might potentially also open up a more constructive position, one that seeks to develop an emancipatory thinking of economy itself, following from a logical and practical primacy of a historical specific instantiation of a revolutionary politics.

There are finally those, however, who stress the “economic” dimension of the very method of *Capital* and suggest that rather than obfuscating the underlying politics of the dominant class, economy is the inherent structure of the capitalist economy, which determines, and will determine, all political life and the entire space of action of its political actors. A critical approach would then unfold in an opposite

direction to the former strand, unveiling the economic behind any politics, emancipatory or other. Others, still, would take this reversion to imply also moving the sovereignty of political decision-making away from the apparently autonomous forces of international relations and states, to the hand of workers and those who produce value - as they would be already unconsciously in charge - arguing against a too structural understanding of the economic logic.

These different tendencies, and the tensions between them, find themselves condensed by the expression that defines what *Capital* is supposed to achieve, taking Marxism (maybe this is why it took the form of an “-ism” that even Marx rejected) itself as a contradictory articulation, on that encompasses the most distinct and conflicting presentations and socio-political agendas. This contradictory tension in Marxism throughout its history may require a repeated return, time and time again, to Marx’s thought, repeatedly subtracting any “ism” and constantly inscribing the need to rethink its meaning, scope, and emphasis, at every new historical turn and each step taken. Did Lenin not famously state that Marx’s theory is so powerful because it is true? If this were to be the case, what truth are we dealing with here? Truth is obviously not an objective category and hence not something shared by everyone. Rather it is a category of practice. Yet, it is important to emphasize this aspect – even against Lenin – since whatever the truth of Marx’s endeavor may or will have been, it should not simply be reduced to establishing an objective knowledge of the situation, of history or whatever (an assumption that underlies the greatest part of the diverse bulk of Marxisms). But it is something that can offer subjective orientation.

Especially today this appears to be of high importance, as again, antagonisms and tensions re-emerge everywhere and in an ever more pressing manner. Even new extremist (if one may say so) positions, have been added to the classical list of variations. Including those, for example, who affirm that the time has come to ultimately abandon the critique of political economy altogether, as there is no explanatory potential left in it, and those - from all sides of the political spectrum, including quite conservative ones - who announce that Marx’s thinking has never been more opportune and alive than now. How to avoid turning Marx, as Lenin also analyzed in the beginning of his “State and Revolution,” into an often referred to and often denounced idol that is of no efficacy whatsoever?

Following this, we can probe into this complex field of positions in order to find out whether there is any contemporary critique of political economy worthy of this name, be it classically Marxian or otherwise. A first spontaneous answer might appear to be straightforwardly clear: yes, there is, it is the same critique of political economy that was invented by Marx and exercised by generations of Marx’s readers, including orthodox or rather unorthodox Marxists. But such a spontaneous affirmative answer might raise certain doubts and, may be a vague, or perhaps a more refined

form of skepticism. Why should Marx’s critique of political economy not need to change, when the world around it seems to do so all along? Haven’t we been witnessing by far, not only progressive, but also and clearly even more regressive phenomena, and tendencies, of the economic and political dynamics in recent years (and does one really have to recall all the failures of all attempts of Marxist politics)? Might it not be, that the very lack of transformation of the critique of political economy is one of the reasons why its contemporary efficiency is drastically hindered, and inherently limited (it could have been at least one of the reasons for the disasters that were lived through in the name of Marxism)? Is the critique of political economy as dead (though still twitching from time to time) as old-school, orthodox Marxism is? Or is orthodox Marxism more alive than ever (one should also recall that some dead refuse to die)?

One may argue against this line of questioning and thus also against the affirmative answer we delineated above, namely that there have been attempts undertaken by faithful Marxists to present and unfold a renewed (articulation of the) critique of political economy, able to deal with the contemporary transformations of economy and politics, with its radicalizations as well as with its regressions. One can very easily assemble names likes those of Louis Althusser, David Harvey, Moishe Postone, Michael Heinrich, Antonio Negri, Kojin Karatani, Slavoj Žižek and many others who tried to actualize (or prove the untethered actuality of) Marx’s project for contemporary circumstances, either anticipated or unforeseen by him. Did not also Alain Badiou recently declare that nowadays we have reached a historical epoch in which Marx’s analysis is truer, and more valid than ever, even more so than in Marx’s time? Yet, what does this in consequence amount to?

The present issue of *Crisis and Critique* aims to tackle some of the issues presented above. The editors are well aware that we are not presenting an exhaustive picture of the protracted landscape of contemporary versions of Marx’s thought, and are not trying to engage in a project of predicting the future of capitalist societies, and its relations of domination and exploitation (although if it were to work, why not...). The present issue gathers philosophers, theoreticians, and thinkers, from different traditions and backgrounds, who all do one thing: they read Marx. The main thrust of the issue does not only lie in reiterating the relevance of Marx and (especially) of *Capital* in and for our present conjuncture, but lies also in analyzing and mapping the status of the contemporary critiques of political economy, and its possible contributions to opening up the space for the political and intellectual overcoming of the deadlocks and impasses of late global capitalism: a project that even the most conservative partisans, of the most regressive tendencies today, willingly or unwillingly endorse.

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