
Only a reified consciousness can declare that it is in possession of the requisite knowledge, political capacity, and technical expertise not only for resolving capitalist crises but also to do so “for the workers”. (p.224)

For over two decades now, Werner Bonefeld has been a subversive–some might say heretical–figure within Marxism. Well versed in the vibrant value-theoretical debates within the West German Left in the 1970s and 80s, he completed his PhD in Edinburgh in the late 1980s and quickly established a reputation as an uncompromising critic of dominant strains of historical materialist thought, in the context of the zenith of Thatcherism in the UK and, of course, the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. After his intervention in a series of debates on dialectics and state theory within the pages of *Capital & Class* and, the now defunct, *Common Sense*, Bonefeld notably co-edited three volumes on *Open Marxism* between 1992 and 1995,¹ and co-edited two further volumes debating post-Fordism and the politics of money with his long-term collaborator John Holloway in 1991 and 1996.² In these and other subsequently published outlets, Bonefeld has relentlessly laid bare the “reified consciousness” of a good deal of historical materialist scholarship while advancing an “open” Marxism, committed to the critique of political economy as a dialectical and anti-dogmatic project.

The Open Marxism Bonefeld has been a key proponent of since the 1980s represents a heterodox approach to social science that foregrounds the necessity of

1 See Bonefeld et al. (1992a, 1992b, 1995).
critique (see Bonefeld 2001) in a perverted world which is constituted “behind the backs” of economic actors yet which subsumes and dominates their social interaction, their consciousness of “the economy” and their role within it (see Charnock 2010). As Bonefeld and his co-authors explained back in 1992, “a central target for Marxism with an open character is fetishism. Fetishism is the construal (in theory) and the constitution (in practice) of social relations as ‘thinglike’, perverting such relations into a commodified and sheerly structural form” (Bonefeld et al. 1992a: xii). Open Marxism has therefore long been concerned with thought as de-fetishisation—with revealing the alienated social content behind the economic forms and categories (“real abstractions”) that debase and enslave social individuals. For Open Marxism, recognising the social content of economic forms and categories is of fundamental importance to thought, and class struggle—comprehended as labour’s permanent struggle in and against capital—is crucial to the approach. This recognition has led Bonefeld and others to confront those who would propound versions of “anti-capitalist” politics that more often than not succumb to the aim of socialising capital “for the workers”. Such politics is complicit, suggests Open Marxism, in the foreclosure of a possible world in which social individuals might live in freedom, dignity and mutual recognition (more on this below).

Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy (hereafter CTCPE) is Bonefeld’s most accomplished work to date, and certainly represents a definitive statement on critique, negative dialectics, and Open Marxism. While it complements recent books by similarly-minded scholars such as Holloway (2010) and Michael Heinrich (2012), this is very much Bonefeld’s own account of what he sees as being the subversive power of Marxism as Critical Theory. Indeed, what quickly emerges from the opening pages of the book is its intellectual debt not only to Marx, but equally to those luminaries of the early Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno and Max
Horkheimer, and to the participants in the Neue Marx-Lektüre approach debated in West Germany from the 1960s (principally Hans-Georg Backhaus, Helmut Reichelt, and, later, Moishe Postone). The influence of these thinkers on Bonefeld is clear, but he wastes no time in pinpointing their respective limitations so as to clear the way for a book which sets out his own unique vision of Marxism as Critical Theory that “moves” in reflexive and dialectical engagement with its definite subject matter: political economy and the inherently antagonistic social constitution of capital.

The book is consistent in its relation to Bonefeld’s main concerns since the 1990s—particularly his focus on the state. As Bonefeld himself highlights, “the critique of political economy is not just a critique of the economic form of society”; rather, it is “also a critique of the political form of society, which…[he develops in CTCPE] first by means of an argument about the relationship between world market and national state, and then by an account of the state as a political form of capitalist social relations” (p.11). In delivering his account of the state—which necessarily draws attention to value, money, and the world market—Bonefeld takes the reader through decades of debate within Marxism, covering such themes as abstract labor, state theory, globalisation and neoliberalism (including the contemporary relevance of Adam Smith and German Ordoliberalism). In the process, he exposes the weaknesses of others’ arguments with clarity and ruthlessness. And he provides not only an alternative and robust understanding of the capitalist economy but also a critique that is devastating in its deciphering of world market and state as perverted, mutually reinforcing forms of social relations.

The early chapters of CTCPE serve to establish why Critical Theory has been a necessary but, for the most part, insufficient resource for “thinking out” of a perverted world.3 For Bonefeld, negative critique is necessarily a critique of political

3 The Neue Marx-Lektüre approach, for instance, focused on a critical reconstruction of Marx’s critique of political economy but failed to acknowledge the centrality of class struggle to it, and failed to
economy *qua* the economy of time. “In capitalism,” he agrees with Adorno, “…‘time is ontologised’ (p. 133). Ontologised time is specifically the time of the value form. In capitalism, today more than ever, the totality of human social praxis is mediated by the value form, which reduces all concrete labour to a matter of homogenised and cumulative time. This is the time of abstract labour, the substance of wealth in capitalism. It appears in its most developed form as money—a “real abstraction” with objective social power. A society in which money attains such social power is a debased society: “one in which human sensuous practice exists…in the form of a movement of coins that impose themselves objectively on and through the acting subjects as if the law of coins were a world apart from the social subjects who constitute the society governed by coins” (p.1). In capitalism—and, therefore, for Bonefeld—time is money and time is very much of the essence:

From the appropriation of unpaid labour time to the endless struggle over the division between necessary labour time and surplus labour time, from the “imposition” of labour time by time-theft, this “petty pilferings of minutes”, “snatching a few minutes”, to the stealing from the worker of additional time-atoms of unpaid units of labour time by means of greater labour flexibility and “systematic robbery of what is necessary for the life” of the worker, the life-time of the worker is reduced to the relentless tick and tock of the time of value. The worker then appears as “nothing more than personified labour time”—a *time’s carcase*. That is to say, value-validity is the validity of a time of labour made abstract. (p. 136)
Bonefeld’s analysis of time sheds light on the “globalising” character of capital (“the abstract labour of value production comprises thus the homogenisation of time as a world market reality of socially necessary abstract time” [p.147]), and the political constitution of a world market that subsists through the competitive struggles of national states to maintain their position within the hierarchy of world prices by enforcing the dictates of time upon “national” society. Yet Bonefeld also points to the power of negative critique in pointing to the basis for human emancipation from capital and a society governed by coins (“the time of human emancipation is the time of human purposes. Freely disposable time is the very content of life. This time posits a form of human wealth that is entirely at odds with the idea that time is money” [p.137]). For Bonefeld, then, the critique of political economy is a critique of ontologised time or it is nothing at all.

In spite of the book’s focus on time, CTCPE should be essential reading for any critical thinker of space, as I would imagine most readers of Antipode consider themselves to be. To begin with, Bonefeld’s approach and account of the critique of political economy as critical theory asks difficult questions of approaches that a good many readers of the journal would be familiar with and perhaps proponents of—including Political Marxism, variants of neo-Gramscianism, autonomism-operaismo, and regulationist state theory. Bonefeld’s book also deals with familiar concepts in possibly unfamiliar ways. For example, in a chapter on primitive accumulation—a concept recognisable to most readers of historical-geographical materialist literatures after its re-rendering as “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey 2003)–Bonefeld’s treatment reminds us that the critique of political economy was never merely about the historical documentation and criticism of pernicious capitalist practices or destructive social processes. Rather, as critical theory, it also points to the

4 The only self-identifying “geographers/urbanists” I can recall to mind that acknowledge the influence of Open Marxism are Jamie Gough and Derek Kerr.
“permanence” of primitive accumulation, and regardless of the conditions of development of specific societies at specific moments in time: “…primitive accumulation is the historical presupposition and basis of capital and…its systematic content is the constitutive premise of capitalist social relations. Its content is suspended [aufgehoben] in capitalist economic forms” (p.86).

While Bonefeld rarely discusses space explicitly, his version of the critique of political economy is rich with critical insight into the processual, fluid, multi-scalar character of global capitalism (the constitution of the national state, for example, as a political node within the global flow of capital) that has long since animated Marx-inspired geographic thought. Moreover, his foregrounding of capitalist time–with all the corollaries this has for a critical comprehension of world money, the international division of labour, our relation with nature, and the irrational rationality of crises in capitalism–alerts us, I think, to the dangers of a creeping space-centrism–maybe even a fetishism–that figures in much of the en vogue literature on “planetary urbanisation”, for example.5 CTCPE forcefully reminds us that whatever the form taken by “the wide variety of urbanisation processes that are currently reshaping the urban world” and, it follows, the search for varied and novel ways of “deciphering new emergent landscapes of sociospatial difference that have been crystallising in recent decades” (Brenner and Schmid 2013: 163), there remains in the critique of political economy a rich resource for thinking about “the apparent ‘autonomisation of

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5 Much of this literature owes a debt to Henri Lefebvre. Andy Merrifield (2013: 16) writes:

“Industrialisation has, in a word, negated itself, bitten off its own tail, advanced quantitatively to such a point that qualitatively it has bequeathed something new, something pathological, something economically and politically necessary: planetary urbanisation”. In the context of this review, it is noteworthy that Merrifield (2011) has also called for a more affirmative “Magical Marxism” and a once and for all break with the “dour negativity” of earlier Marxisms. On the questions of time versus space, and of negativity in Lefebvre–in contrast with Harvey’s classical Marxism–see Charnock (2014).
the world market’ as the ‘objective social force’ of capitalist social relations” (p.153), that is rooted in a critique of ontologised time. In other words, and notwithstanding the profound transformation of the form of urbanisation that, some suggest, necessitates a new epistemology of the urban as a basis for “concrete research”, “comparative analysis” and “empirical investigation”, Bonefeld’s book forcefully reminds us that it capital’s thirst for relative surplus value that determines humans’ metabolic relation with nature and the production of space, and which therefore is central to any attempt to decipher the content behind transformations in the form taken by social metabolism, the international division of labour, and changing forms of sociospatiality across the planet.

There is a further reason why any critic of capitalism should read this book. As Europe, in particular, has arguably entered an era dubbed the “new normal”–marked by low growth rates, high structural unemployment and indefinite austerity–and, crucially, while we witness the ascendancy of a variety of new forms of anti-austerity politics of both progressive and reactionary hues, CTCPE serves as a stark warning of the dangers of what Adorno terms “ticket thinking” (p.224). For Bonefeld, such thinking amounts to “the false promise that, if planned well, the further progress of economic development will liberate the propertyless producers of surplus value from the harsh reality of their social condition” (p.221). In Bonefeld’s reading of the critique of political economy, with its central recognition of class as a negative concept, “the critique of class society finds its positive resolution not in better-paid and fully-employed producers of surplus value. It finds its positive resolution only in the classless society”. But Bonefeld’s argument goes further than re-invoking Marxian criticisms of reformist politics. How many anti-austerity/anti-globalisation social and political movements today can stand up to scrutiny based upon his argument that, too often, they espouse a “critique of the capitalist”, and campaign on the basis of a
politics that “attributes capitalist conditions to the conscious activity of some identifiable individuals who no longer appear as the personifications of economic categories but, rather, as the personalised object of misery” (p.196)? In particular, how many such movements summon “the idea of finance and speculators as merchants of greed and, counterpoised to this, espouse the idea of a national community based on…imagined forms of national morality and integrity” (p.200)? Such a mindset, for Bonefeld, perceives a world that “appears to be divided between hated forms of capitalism, especially finance and money capital, and concrete nature. The concrete is conceived as immediate, direct, matter for use and rooted in industry and productive activity…money and financial capital are identified with capitalism while industry and productive labour are perceived as constituting the concrete and creative enterprise of a national community” (p.211). Such thought is inherently dangerous. It necessarily functions to demonise some Other social subject (“the bankers”; “Wall Street”; “US imperialism”; “the Troika”?). Bonefeld denounces such a “resentful theology of anti-capitalism. It personalises hated forms of capitalism, provides outlet for discontent, and offers an enemy” (p.214).6

Such argumentation belongs to Critical Theory at its intelligent, robust and challenging best–argumentation this book delivers from cover to cover. In a world many of us would wish to revolutionise as a matter of urgency, it is fair to say that reading Bonefeld’s Marxism as Critical Theory might provoke profound unease and dissatisfaction. His critique appears to want to undermine everything yet affirm nothing. It is relentless in its questioning and deciphering, yet provides no answers, no manifesto, no blueprint for the future, no “what is to be done”. Yet this is precisely

6 Bonefeld argues that such a posture resembles a form of “Modern Antisemitism”. For a discussion of this argument in the context of European alter-globalisation politics in recent years, see Schlembach (2014).
why “Marxist” and “non-Marxist” alike should read it. There’s too much at stake not to do so.

References

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