

**Werner Bonefeld**, *A Critical Theory of Economic Compulsion: Wealth, Suffering, Negation*, New York: Routledge, 2023. ISBN: 9781032318776 (hardback); 9781032318783 (paperback); 9781003311836 (ebook)

The past several years have seen the Open Marxism tradition thrown into flux by both the vicissitudes of the capitalist world-system and the lives of its contributors. Emerging in the 1980s in the midst of the triplicate crises of the Keynesian state, structuralism, and the rise of the New Right, the loose school of thought saw its propagation in a series of Pluto Press books published between 1990 and 1995, with a fourth volume in 2020 (Bonefeld et al. 1992a; Bonefeld et al. 1992b; Bonefeld et al. 1995; Dinerstein et al. 2020). The collections included texts from Werner Bonefeld, John Holloway, Simon Clarke, Richard Gunn, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Hans-Georg Backhaus, Ana Cecilia Dinerstein and others. Responding to the passing of the Soviet Union, and with it Marxist-Leninist state socialism, these thinkers sought to lay the dogmatisms and teleologies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to rest in favor of a program of empirical research that centers the openness of Marxist categories themselves. The first volume of *Open Marxism* posited its antithesis in a “closed” Marxism that “accepts the horizons of a given world as its own theoretical horizons and/or it announces a determinism which is causalist or teleological as the case may be” (Bonefeld et al. 1992: xii), a genealogy often associated with the Gramscian and Althusserian traditions.

Initially derived from Johannes Agnoli and later consolidated by Werner Bonefeld in the first issue of *Common Sense*, a journal produced by the Edinburgh chapter of the Conference of Socialist Economists, Open Marxism refers to a union of theory and practice and therefore a “unity of critique and destruction, denunciation and decomposition, demystification and destabilisation” (Bonefeld 1987: 34). Informed by council, autonomist, communizer and feminist thought, Open Marxism sidesteps the Marxist-Leninist and structuralist traditions in favor of an alternative genealogy that runs through Antonie Pannekoek, Karl Korsch, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, the Yugoslav Praxis Group, Bolívar Echeverría, and others. Of particular interest to the tradition are the value-form debates that sprung from the West Germany of the 1970s, state and monetary theory, Marxological reconstruction, and dialectical method. In

addition to the four volumes published by Pluto Press and an archive of *Common Sense* issues that date from 1987 through 1999 (<https://commonsensejournal.org.uk/>), Open Marxism has been articulated, fleshed out, and debated at the Conference of Socialist Economists and its in-house journal *Capital & Class*.

In recent years, Open Marxism has seen a resurgence of interest and participation, perhaps driven by the post-2008 conjuncture and its cycle of struggles. The creative destruction of 2008 brought, on the one hand, a social democratic (or democratic socialist) emphasis on wealth inequality, electoral strategy, and big tent party politics, and, on the other, a combustible range of square occupations, mass abolitionist rebellions, and radical climate action. Likewise, a resurgent interest in Marxism, and with it an abundance of internecine Marxological debates, has been unevenly matched by attempts to flesh out the theoretical, organizational, and spatial practices of a communist politic. The defeats of Corbyn and Sanders, followed shortly by COVID-19, global financial crisis, and the Russia–Ukraine war, revealed the limitations of orthodox Marxism and, simultaneously, reaffirmed Open Marxism’s primacy of interpretation as a preventative against false praxis (Dinerstein et al. 2020: xiii).

Late last year, Clarke passed away at the age of 76, leaving a monumental body of work on the fetishized presuppositions of the social sciences, crisis theory, capitalist development in Russia, modes of production, periodization, and value in his wake. That same month, Bonefeld retired from a long-held position in the Department of Politics at the University of York. His legacy ranges from studies on social form and transformations in the mode of production, excavations of primitive accumulation and abstract labor, and unorthodox readings of Benjamin and Adorno. Both Clarke and Bonefeld contributed to a range of Conference of Socialist Economists debates, while their respective contributions to Volume One of *Open Marxism* laid the foundation for the tradition’s critique of elemental capitalist categories and their expression in space-time. Despite the untimely nature of the former, Clarke’s passing and Bonefeld’s retirement occasions an assessment of the legacy and ongoing relevance of Open Marxism itself: do the foundational precepts laid out in *Common Notions*, *Capital & Class*, and *Open Marxism* still hold true in the present conjuncture? Can the methodological openness and emphasis on the negativity of critique be translated to a new cycle of crises and struggles? And has the

intellectual tradition itself been suitably passed on to a younger generation of theorists and practitioners?

Published in March 2023 in Routledge's "Critiques and Alternatives to Capitalism" series (edited by Marcello Musto), Bonefeld's *A Critical Theory of Economic Compulsion: Wealth, Suffering, Negation* is not a direct answer to these questions, yet propels readers in a direction that may allow insight on all three. *A Critical Theory of Economic Compulsion* posits a theoretically unified notion of capitalist social relations, their ostensible rejoinder in what Bonefeld dubs socialist labor economy, and, by way of determinate negation, the necessity of communism as a "completely different conception of human development" (p.157). The text follows several book-length and edited volumes that seek to produce effective tension between Marx's critique of political economy and critical theory. In these texts, Bonefeld diagnoses the place of class struggle in capitalist totality, German ordoliberalism, the scale and power of money, primitive accumulation, modern antisemitism, and the role of human dignity in the communist horizon. *A Critical Theory of Economic Compulsion* expands on these works, particularly *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy* (Bonefeld 2014), through extensive discussion of the "silent" (also translated as "mute") compulsion of capitalist social relations and the manner in which economic categories appear as "inverted" social forms.

Bonefeld's intellectual project can be understood as a development of the critique of political economy as a critical social theory. Inspired by form-theoretical readings of Marx, late period Frankfurt School texts by Adorno, Alfred Sohn-Rethel, and Alfred Schmidt, and the Neue Marx-Lektüre initiated by Adorno's students, this mouthful of a phrase alludes to both the scope and epistemological foundation of Bonefeld's social theoretical project. For Marx, the epistemological basis of the critique of political economy rests in the notion that "all science would be superfluous if the form of appearance of things directly coincided with their essence" (Marx 1991: 956). Bonefeld takes this up, noting that the "natural character of capitalist society is both an actuality and an illusion", while the "point of critique is comprehension of society as a process of valorisation, of money that begets more money" (p.23). The critical theory of silent economic compulsion thus begins with a critique of commodity fetishism, yet it is not only the commodity that is fetishized but capitalist social relations writ large. Contrary to critical theories

that posit capital and its relations as autonomous from the social life it feeds on, Bonefeld argues that the “shape of society as a process of real economic abstraction remains human” (p.135), while “the point of the critique of fetishism is to grasp the economic relations as inverted social relations” (p.22). The implications of this critical theory will be expounded upon later; however, before delving into the political horizon of Bonefeld’s critique, it is imperative to provide a succinct overview of the critique of political economy as a critical theory of society that Open Marxism propounds.

*A Critical Theory of Economic Compulsion* is broken up into two sections, seven chapters and a short postscript on the necessity and impossibility of communism. Part 1 focuses on society as a process of real abstraction and the silent compulsion of capitalist social relations. It begins in Chapter 2 with a discussion of the value abstraction and its hidden class relations, each historically determined by the equivalent exchange of unequal values. The doubly free laborer, free to dispose of their labor power and free from their means of social reproduction, is the prerequisite of capitalist wealth and the foundation of class society. Drawing on Adorno and Sohn-Rethel, Bonefeld posits society as a process of real abstraction, an objective relation of economic compulsion that is only perceptible through “the wounds inflicted by the movement of economic quantities” (p.32). Contrary to Marxist critiques that seek to disabuse Smith’s “invisible hand”, Bonefeld instead posits it as “the objective subject of reified society” (p.26), a subject that regulates the exchange of equivalent units of abstract labor. Chapter 3 takes up the organization of production and labor through the money economy, an “inverted sociability” wherein the satisfaction of human needs is made irrelevant in the face of the validation (or not) of concrete labor through money exchange. For Bonefeld, the “value-validity of the expended concrete labour posits not an atom of use-value” (p.53), while the purpose of money, as the social form of capitalist wealth, is solely to “produce money for the sake of more money” (p.59).

The world market, not merely as scale or context for the capital relation but as a real abstraction of silent economic compulsion itself, is the subject of Chapter 4. Drawing extensively from Clarke (1988), Bonefeld articulates the immanent pressures that drive the capitalist to develop the productive forces into increasingly extensive and intensive spatial configurations. Faced with tendential crises of overproduction, wherein capital cannot valorize itself “at a rate

sufficient to sustain its renewed conversion into a further, expanded process of valorisation” (p.72), individual capitalists attempt to maintain their own profitability by way of a “social process of surplus value extraction through the cheapening of the commodity labour power” (p.73). This involves an intensification of the labor process within individual firms, but also the seeking of cheaper labor sources across the face of the globe. Rhyming with critical geography, Bonefeld’s notion of the world market is thus not only a passive absolute space where economic activity occurs, but a social and relational space presupposed and reproduced by capitalist relations of production. This leads to a theory of the capitalist state as the political form of bourgeois society, wherein class society is expressed through private property, contract, and the juridical individual. Neither autonomous from capitalist social relations nor reducible to them, the state is rather an order making and order preserving force that operates through the rule of law and public, monetary, and fiscal policy.

Part 1’s exposition of the critique of political economy as a critical theory of society is met with its obverse in Part 2, which seeks to express a politics of human emancipation through what Bonefeld dubs communist “now-time”. Negative critique “amounts to brushing against the flow of the inverted world of society as economic object”, while “the decipherment of the existing relations has historically assumed the direct democracy of the council, the commune, the Räte, the assemblies” (p.144). The existing social relations of capitalism are merely the “negative truth content of what is unknown” and, contra socialist versions of labor economy, Bonefeld posits how “[c]ommunism as negation is the laboratory of alterity through the practical decipherment of the existing relations of economic compulsion” (p.142). In a milieu of academic Marxism that often elides politics or dresses it in abstraction, Bonefeld’s clear-eyed evocation of the commune is refreshing. It is the “laboratory of communist learning by doing” (p.144) and “the organisational form of radical historical change” (p.145). Bonefeld thusly summons Paris (1871), the council communists of Munich (1919), and the sailors of Kronstadt (1921), as well as Tiananmen, Chiapas, Tunis, Cairo, Damascus, Istanbul, and Minneapolis, as examples of negation in action.

These chapters are full of productive readings of Adorno and Benjamin, as well as biting critiques of Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Nancy Fraser, and David Harvey. Marxist sacred

cows like hegemony, scientific socialism, and even class struggle are put to the test, while concepts like social coldness, now-time, and negative dialectics are given primacy in the communist arsenal. To present some indicative examples, per Bonefeld, hegemony is hardly a critical concept and can only conceive of emancipation through struggle on an equal plane of interests; scientific socialism reifies labor as the natural basis of all modes of production, while rejecting its capitalist modality; class struggle is a negative social category and a struggle for crude material things in the present, yet also contains the possibility of food, housing, clothing, warmth, love, affection, knowledge, time for enjoyment, comfort, and dignity. A communist politic, for Bonefeld, cannot possibly begin with a teleology of redemption from the unnecessary suffering of capitalism. It is rather, against both liberal democratic and democratic socialist versions of economic development, “the promise of human emancipation ... in the irreconcilability between the struggle for a society of human purposes and the untruth of a society in which humanity exists as exploitable means” (p.158). In closing, Bonefeld proffers not the question of what is to be done, but rather a proposition: how a class in-itself really is a struggle for-itself (p.130).

As a negative critical theory and communist politic, *A Critical Theory of Economic Compulsion* clarifies past Bonefeld scholarship and makes clear the antinomies of contemporary socialist discourse. Rather than a means to an end, Bonefeld understands the democratic socialist struggle for equitable living conditions under bourgeois society as an untruth that amounts to a “civilising society’s treatment of its worker” (p.80). Following Moishe Postone’s (1993) critique of labor, Bonefeld posits the democratic socialist conception of capitalism as one of unequal distribution that can only be combatted through a “democratic socialist type of distribution” (p.92). Ralph Miliband, Leo Panitch, Wolfgang Streeck, David Harvey, and Nancy Fraser are all targets for their respective articulations of what Bonefeld understands as a simultaneously moral and utilitarian democratic socialist critique; and while the differences between each thinker tend to be unhelpfully homogenized in Bonefeld’s exposition, their understandings of labor, finance, and the state are expertly picked apart.

In antithesis to this socialist politic attenuated by the fetishized social relations it seeks to overcome, Bonefeld locates the commune as a historical form that carries the possibility of



spontaneous negation, an “emergency brake on the progress of the present towards its own future” (p.142). Rather than a rational, progressive blueprint for a socialist society, Bonefeld asserts the commune, council, Räte, and assembly as a “negation of the existing relations of misery” and a “laboratory of communist learning by doing” (p.143). Bonefeld seeks to recuperate Rosa Luxemburg’s concept of spontaneity as the “self-reflective, organisational form of the corporeal experience of suffering as resistance to suffering ... the organisational form of negation, learning by doing, and living upright” (p.144). In this, *A Critical Theory of Economic Compulsion* is positioned in a long tradition of anti-authoritarian, and occasionally anti-Marxist, thought ranging from Luxemburg and Herbert Marcuse through Cornelius Castoriadis and Hannah Arendt. Logically and historically predisposed against “programmatism” and a positive, planned notion of the communist horizon, the commune is instead a negative concept for Bonefeld, yet one that contains the content of a classless society.

With few exceptions though, the contours of historical experience, their spatial expression and resonance for contemporary communist politics are left unexamined. What are we to make of a list of datums that range from the Paris Commune through Tiananmen Square, the Arab Spring, and beyond? If the world market is an ongoing expression of society as real abstraction, then how do we reckon with the localized scale of movements against pipelines, gentrification, and police violence? And how do we produce cognitive maps, or counter-mapping efforts, of an unevenly developed capitalism as it transitions into evermore fitful financial, ecological, and militarized crises? More generally, what is the spatiality of the commune and can we conceive of jumping scales, or a meaningful internationalism, within its negative schema? Trade union organization is critiqued by Bonefeld as an expression of conformity, yet little page space is given to discussion of either its dissolution or advancement; likewise, while Bonefeld evokes the Zapatistas and George Floyd rebellion, the racializing apparatuses of policing and carcerality are ignored entirely, while global shifts in the composition of gendered social reproduction also receive short shrift.

These elisions noted, the content of Bonefeld’s critical theory is refreshing in its embrace of politics. Form-analytic critical theory often concludes with the immanent laws of capitalist competition, but Bonefeld takes them as his starting point and goes on to formulate the potential

for a practicable communist strategy. Correspondingly, Bonefeld's exposition of the world market as produced in and through the capital relation opens the possibility of an empirical research program in line with the production of space and uneven development theses so central to critical geography. It is no surprise that Henri Lefebvre has been proposed as a post hoc practitioner of Open Marxism (Charnock 2010). Several questions remain: what is the relationship between the ruthless critique of all that exists and everyday organization? And how do we, as conscious capitalist subjects, foment communism as a movement of negation while constantly under the boot of labor, police, and monetary discipline?

*A Critical Theory of Economic Compulsion*, at a slim yet dense 180 pages, offers a holistic rejoinder to the predominant socialist politics of the Global North and an explication of both Bonefeld's negative critical project and the theoretical arsenal of Open Marxism. As nodded to in the text, the above questions will almost certainly not be answered in an academic publication, although several decades of work from Bonefeld, Clarke, Holloway, Dinerstein, and others provide a nearly unmatched reservoir of insight on the movement of value, the form of the capitalist state, and vacillations of crisis. Rather, as indicated in the Postscript, the "promise of human emancipation lays in the irreconcilability between the struggle for a society of human purposes and the untruth of a society in which humanity exists as exploitable means" (p.158). Whether one agrees with the communist politic proposed, it is comprehensive in its unity of critique, theory, and practice and positions itself in antagonism to the dominant socialist politics of our era; further, Bonefeld's latest nods to the cohesiveness of the Open Marxist critique and its capacity for change in the face of a rapidly mutating capitalist world system.

An in memoriam for the late Clarke—"Simon, our teacher and friend, showed what it means to be *ein guter Mensch*"—opens up *A Critical Theory of Economic Compulsion* and, alongside Bonefeld's retirement, recalls the transitional conjuncture Open Marxism finds itself in today. Despite these departures, Open Marxism has seen a flurry of publishing activity in recent years, drawing on both popular and academic resources in social theoretical studies of Adorno, Benjamin, the capitalist state, real abstraction, monetary crisis, and the world market; additionally, a younger generation of Open Marxist thinkers and practitioners, among them several geographers (Alami 2019; Charnock 2010), continue to elaborate a critical theory of



negation on empirical grounds that both develop and depart from the tradition's typical objects of study. Bonefeld's (1987: 37) opening salvo in the first issue of *Common Sense*, of Open Marxism as "the theoretical concept of practice and the practical concept of theory which provokes crises of itself as a matter of its inherent strength and validity", remains as the tradition's heuristic and critical lifebook; its anti-authoritarian political horizon remains to be seen.

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