

---

# Negative dialectics and the critique of economic objectivity

History of the Human Sciences  
2016, Vol. 29(2) 60–76  
© The Author(s) 2016  
Reprints and permission:  
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0952695116637294  
hhs.sagepub.com



**Werner Bonefeld**  
University of York, UK

## Abstract

This article explores Adorno's negative dialectics as a critical social theory of economic objectivity. It rejects the conventional view that Adorno does not offer a critique of the economic forms of capitalist society. The article holds that negative dialectics is a dialectics of the social world in the form of the economic object, one that is governed by the movement of economic quantities, that is, real economic abstractions. Negative dialectics refuses to accept the constituted economic categories as categories of economic nature. Instead, the article argues, it amounts to a conceptualized social praxis [*begriffene Praxis*] of the capitalistically constituted social relations, which manifest themselves in the form of seemingly independent economic categories. Economic nature is a socially constituted nature, which entails the class antagonism in its concept. The article concludes that for negative dialectics the explanation of real economic abstractions lies in the understanding of the class-divided nature of human practice.

## Keywords

Theodor Adorno, critique of political economy, economic objectivity, Karl Marx, negative dialectics

## Introduction

This article presents Adorno's negative dialectics as a critique of society in the form of the economic object. It takes its cue from Max Horkheimer's (1992a: 229) remarks that 'human beings produce, through their own labour, a reality that increasingly enslaves them' and that therefore Marx's critique of political economy amounts to a 'judgment on

---

### Corresponding author:

Werner Bonefeld, Department of Politics, University of York, Heslington, York YO10 5DD, UK.  
Email: werner.bonefeld@york.ac.uk

existence'. The account starts with a section on economic objectivity as the subject matter of negative dialectics. It argues that, for Adorno, historical materialism is a critique of the false society, one that is governed by the movement of real economic abstractions. The following section discusses Adorno's dictum that 'society remains class struggle' (1989: 272). It argues that class is a negative category and develops this point in the context of Adorno's critique of capitalist exchange relations. The final section – 'Looking on the Bright Side of the Wronged World' – is the conclusion. It sums up the political implications of the negative dialectics of economic objectivity, according to which Marx's critique is the modern manifestation of philosophy's search for the good and reasonable organization of life (Horkheimer, 1992b). It holds that 'there is a tenderness only in the coarsest demand: that no-one should go hungry any more' (Adorno, 2005: 156).<sup>1</sup>

## **I Economic objectivity and its critique: On negative dialectics**

The title of the article contains two seeming paradoxes. First, it contends that Adorno's critical social theory amounts to a critique of the constituted relations of economic objectivity. This is not a common view. Martin Jay (1973: 152) and Jürgen Habermas (1983: 109) have argued that Adorno's critical theory did not concern itself with political economy or economics, be it bourgeois economics or Marxian economics.<sup>2</sup> However, what would a critical theory of society amount to if it were not to concern itself with the manner in which society maintains itself? Why, really, does this content, human social reproduction, take the form of seemingly self-moving economic forces?<sup>3</sup>

The second paradox derives from the first paradox, which supposes a connection between Adorno's social theory and the critique of economic objectivity beyond the disciplinary divide between economics and sociology. According to the established view, sociology deals with the relationships between people. It analyses interpersonal relationships 'without paying too much attention to their objectified economic forms' (Adorno, 2000: 141).<sup>4</sup> It observes the social relations, analyses the social facts and attributes meaning to them, and then classifies their social attributions into ideal-typical models of social inter-action, without ever once asking itself why society organizes its reproduction in the form of independent economic categories, of price and profit, cash and product. It considers the comprehension of the forms of social wealth, the production of wealth and its distribution, as economic matters. However, like sociology, economics, as the dedicated science of economic matter, does not pay attention to the objectified economic forms either.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, economics recognizes economic quantities, represents their movements with mathematical accuracy, rationalizes the economic aspects of society with the help of algebraic formulae, predicts on the basis of available economic data what markets will do next, describes the manner in which the human agents adjust to market demands for the sake of achieving greater economic efficacy, and explores the means of state as the public authority of economic regulation to achieve optimum factor efficiency – for the sake of economic progress measured by the rate of return.

Economics amounts to a science of the relationship of the economic things among themselves; for the science of economic matter the unemployed represent an economic

zero lacking both in productive contribution and effective demand. That is, for economic thought the essence of economics is not the satisfaction of individual human needs. Rather, the essence of economics is economic nature, which it presumes to be valid because of itself. Yet, it does not tell us what it is. Economics ascribes subjective power to economic things and argues that the movements of economic quantities express value preferences, which reveal a rationality of economic action that expresses itself by price movements, which manifest a dynamic of competition that 'is supposed to keep the whole process alive and even cause it to progress, as if it were moved by an "invisible hand"' (Adorno, 2000: 67). As if by magic, the invisible hand of the market is supposed to transform private vices into public virtues taking care of 'both the beggar and the king' (Adorno, 1990: 251). For the sake of economic insight into the social laws that govern the reproduction of society, it translates quantities of 'capital' into algebra and, on the condition of undistorted competition in undivided markets, assigns the power of economic regulation to some omnipotent invisible hand that tells the social individuals what to buy, where to invest, and how to achieve optimum factor efficiency of its human capital.<sup>6</sup>

There really is, as Dirk Braunstein (2011: 10) remarks drily, no economist by the name of Adorno. Nor is there a sociologist by the name of Adorno. According to Adorno negative dialectics 'flouts tradition' (Adorno, 1990: xix) and he argues that the division between economics and sociology 'sets aside the really central interests of both disciplines' (2000: 144). Neither focuses on the manner in which society organizes the satisfaction of its needs and neither concerns itself with the specific form of capitalist wealth and its production. Instead in the hands of the economists, economic laws are 'metamorphosed . . . into a pretended law of nature' (Adorno, 2008: 118) and for the sociologists 'society is nothing but the average of individual reactive moves' (Adorno, 1990: 198). Both disciplines recognize that the social conflicts have to do with the competitive struggle over the distribution of wealth – who gets what and how much? – yet neither scrutinizes the manner of its production. 'What is entirely overlooked is that this conflict of interests, as manifested in competition, is itself a dilute derivative of much deeper conflicts, those between classes. The former conflicts are really the ones which take place after the central conflict over control of the means of production has already been decided, so that the competition is carried on within the sphere of an already appropriated surplus value' (Adorno, 2000: 67). A few notable exceptions apart, there is hardly a book or journal article that raises the issue of economic objectivity and its class character as a topic of negative dialectics and this despite Adorno's insistence that 'a critical theory of society [is] represented prototypically by that of Marx' (ibid.: 145).<sup>7</sup> Marx, argues Adorno, directed his critique of political economy 'at the substance' (ibid.: 83) of society, that is, the 'social production and reproduction of the life of society as a whole' (ibid.: 141). For Marx (1990: 494, n. 4) the term of inquiry into the mode of human subsistence is the social relations of production, that is, 'the actual, given relations of life . . . which . . . have become apotheosized' in the form of seemingly self-moving economic forces that economic science sets out to calculate with mathematical precision and that sociology fails to recognize when it investigates interpersonal relations based on income, labour market position, educational status, gender, health, etc.<sup>8</sup> Adorno captures this process of inversion of the social relations into seemingly

self-moving economic forces when he argues that ‘the objective rationality of society, namely that of exchange, continues to distance itself through its own dynamic, from the model of logical reason. Consequently, society – what has been made independent – is, in turn, no longer intelligible; only the law of becoming independent is intelligible’ (Adorno, 1976a: 15). The recognition of society as an autonomic economic subject entails its critique.<sup>9</sup> What constitutes the economic independence of society and what appears in the appearance of society as a movement of real economic abstractions, upon which ‘the life of all men hangs’? (Adorno, 1990: 320)

Social reproduction governed by ‘real economic abstractions’ entails both chance and necessity, which are experienced as ‘fate’. The mythological idea of fate becomes no less mythical when it is demythologized ‘into a secular “logic of things”’ that on the pain of ruin judges the actions of the actual individuals by means of competing price signals (Adorno, 1990: 319). Fate is a category of a ghostlike society.<sup>10</sup> Its secret is, however, not some invisible hand that regulates the economic progress of society, as if by magic. Rather, what manifests itself ‘behind the backs of the acting subjects . . . is their own work’ (Marcuse, 1988: 151), and it is their own work that condemns them as economic ‘character masks’ (Adorno, 1976b: 78) or ‘personifications of economic categories’ (Marx, 1990: 92).

Neither the capitalist nor the banker, nor indeed the worker, can extricate themselves from the reality in which they live and which asserts itself not only over them but also through them and by means of them. In this society, ‘the social relations . . . do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material [*dinglich*] relations between persons and social relations between things’ (Marx, 1990: 166). Adorno’s conception of dialectics has to be understood against this background. He conceives of it as ‘the ontology of the wrong state of things’ (Adorno, 1990: 11). It is to ascertain what is active in things and holds sway in them. His critical theory refuses thus ‘to lend itself to sanctioning things as they are’. Intended as a theory without ‘affirmative traits’, it purports to demystify rigidified, thing-like, congealed relationships, rendering their immediacy transparent – as socially constituted things (ibid.: 159). For example, Marx writes that in the money fetish, ‘a social relation, a definite relation between individuals . . . appears as a metal, a stone, as a purely physical external thing which can be found, as such, in nature, and which is indistinguishable in form from its natural existence’ (Marx, 1973: 239). There is only one world, and that is the world of appearances. However, what is appearance an appearance of, and what therefore appears in appearance? Social objectivity ‘does not lead a life of its own’ (Adorno, 1976c: 107). That is to say, the relationship between coins is a socially constituted relationship of economic objectivity. It does not derive from some presumed economic nature. The social relations vanish in their economic appearance as a relationship between coined metals, and this appearance is real. Economic objectivity imposes itself over the social individuals because it prevails in and through them. What appears in the appearance of society as a ‘stone’, or a ‘coin’, is thus a definite social relationship between individuals subsisting as a relationship between ‘coins’. In this ‘coined’ relationship the social individuals vanish, only to reappear as personalities of economic reason, calculating the movement of economic quantities, winnings and losses, and struggling for money-based access to subsistence. Adorno therefore argues that ‘all concepts, even the philosophical ones,

refer to non-conceptualities' (Adorno, 1990: 11). Say, the economic concept profit entails what it is not; that is, it entails the definite social relations between individuals as the vanished premise of its economic force. What has vanished cannot be conceptualized; that is, 'definite social relations between men themselves which assume here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things' and in this form 'Man' appears as a mere economic derivative, a mere character mask of its own social world – mere 'human material' for 'money which is worth more money, value which is greater than itself', capital which begets a profit (Marx, 1990: 165, 740, 257). The social individuals are thus not visible in the movement of economic quantities, and appear as metaphysical distractions to the economic analysis of all things economic. This distraction is all-important. Capital is not 'a very mystic being' of nature. It is a very mystic being of a definite form of social relations (Marx, 1966: 837). Critically conceived, then, historical materialism opens 'up the non-conceptual with the aid of the concept, without reducing it to the concept' (Adorno, 1990: 65). Rather, it explores the economic concept from within and in this manner it 'extinguishes the autarky of the concept, strips the blindfold from our eyes. That the concept is a concept even when dealing with things in being does not change the fact that on its part it is entwined with a non-conceptual whole', that is, 'man' as the vanished subject in the actual relations of life (*ibid.*: 12).

For Adorno, therefore, the notion of historical materialism as a materialism of some historically unfolding forces of production is in its entirety tied to the natural appearance of the existing social relations. At its best, historical materialism is not a metaphysics of economic nature and its objectively unfolding forces. Rather, it is a critique of economic nature, one that dissolves the dogma of natural necessity on a social basis. Economic nature is a social nature, and the seemingly independent economic forces manifest therefore the actual relations of life in the form of natural-economic forces.<sup>11</sup> Adorno thus argues that historical 'materialism is . . . a dissolution of things understood as dogmatic' (Adorno, 1990: 196). It comprehends the social relations of production as the constituent of the forces of production.<sup>12</sup> 'Man' vanishes in her or his economic appearance and his or her own sensuous practice manifests itself as the practice of supersensible economic things that make the world go round not despite the social individuals but, rather, in and through and by means of them. What prevails over society exists through society. In its entirety, the world of economic objectivity is a world of human practice (see Adorno, 1975: 173) and however perverted in the form of seemingly self-moving economic things, the economic world remains a human world. Thus, in the face of mythical economic properties and forces, 'of value as a thing-in-itself, value as "nature"', Adorno's critical theory rejects the 'scientific doctrine of invariants' that identifies some historically active economic nature, which unfolds according to its own innate laws of development. Instead it 'aims at the thing itself' from within its own context 'even if in the end it negates the whole sphere it moves in' (Adorno, 1990: 355, 205, 197; see also 407).

The circumstance that the actual relations of life manifest themselves in the form of the economic object defines the negative character of Adorno's dialectics. Dialectics thinks against the dazzling spell of the supersensible world of (economic) value. That is, it thinks against the flow of the world, 'in contradictions, for the sake of the contradiction once experienced in the thing, and against that contradiction'. It is 'suspicious of all

identity' and therefore resists the temptation to identify reified (economic) things (Adorno, 1990: 145). What appears in reification?<sup>13</sup> What appears is society as a relationship between the economic things and their price tags. This appearance is real. Truth exists as an existing untruth. Marx's conception of the commodity as a 'sensuous supersensible thing'<sup>14</sup> recognizes that the resolution to the dialectical context of immanence is that context itself. The fetishism of commodities does not disguise the 'real' social relations of capitalism. Rather, the fetishism of commodities expresses the 'real' social relations in the form of capital as the automatic subject of society. The social individual is governed by the price mechanism, belongs to the price mechanism, and acts through the price mechanism as the economic form that governs access to the means of subsistence. Subsistence comes with a price tag and the social individuals carry their bond with society in their wallets.

The independent movement of the economic forces, of cash and product, manifests the 'objective necessity' of the existing relations of social reproduction, 'to which we owe everything and that yet [threaten] to bury us all' (Adorno, 2008: 55). The critical intention of what Adorno (1976b: 121) called the *ad hominem* critique of political economy is the demystification of economic categories as sensuous supersensible things. Within themselves, they contain the sensuous practice of the actual relations of life as their constitutive premise. Sensuous practice exists in and through those same supersensible things that govern the social individuals as personifications of their own social world. Adorno captures this idea of a socially constituted world of a sensuous supersensible economic nature well: 'The supersensible world, which is the inverted world, has thus transcended the other world [the sensuous world: W.B.] and contains it within itself; for itself as inverted world, that is, inverted in and of itself, it is itself and its opposite in *their* unity' (Adorno, 1971: 131).<sup>15</sup> Rather than replacing the object with the subject, be it the subject of history as an objectively unfolding force or 'Man' himself or herself as being in alienation, or indeed economic being as an ontological force that, in the last instance, colonizes a supposedly separate life-world of social action, Adorno's dialectical theory – like Marx's – sets out to comprehend the social subject in the form of the object, which is the mode of existence of the subject. Just as objectivity without the subject is no-thing, subjectivity detached from its object is fictitious. 'Man' is a social being qua objectification [*Vergegenständlichung*]. 'Man' is always objectified 'Man'. That is, demythologization of society in the form of the economic object is therefore more than just a matter of a *reductio ad hominem* of its independent coercive force over the social individuals. It is also a '*reductio hominis*, an insight into the delusion of the subject that will style itself an absolute' (Adorno, 1990: 186). Subjectivity means objectification. To be an object is part of the meaning of subjectivity. The issue that the critique of fetishism brings to the fore is not the subject's objectification but its reified mode. What is reified? Appearance [*Schein*] 'is the enchantment of the subject in its own world' (Adorno, 1969: 159).

Society in the inverted form of the economic object is bewitched. It is governed by the movement of incomprehensible economic quantities. The identity of the bewitched world is entirely abstract. In distinction to a traditional theory, which analyses the empirical veracity of incomprehensible economic forces, critical theory sets out to dissolve their dogmatic posture by negating 'the whole sphere it moves in' (Adorno, 1990:

197). Just as the critique of religion does not criticize God on the basis of God, the critique of political economy does not criticize real economic abstractions on the basis of real economic abstractions. Rather, the critique of religion deciphers the social relations that assume the form of God and vanish in the idea of God only to reappear as cowed believers in God, mere human derivatives of divine rule. Similarly, the critique of economic objectivity is not a critique from the standpoint of economic nature. Like the critique of religion, it too deciphers the definite social relations that manifest themselves in mysterious, seemingly extra-mundane economic forms and forces that prevail in and through the social individuals as living personifications of the independent movements of price and profit. It thus explores the economic concept from within to comprehend the actual relations of life that appear in the form of value as a thing of 'nature' (ibid.: 355). This appearance of value is real – as a constituted social nature, in which the essence [*Wesen*] of society manifests itself in the form of a 'fatal mischief [*Unwesen*] of a world that degrades men to means', of a movement of real economic abstractions that assert themselves over and through them on the pain of ruin and disaster (ibid.: 167).

Dialectics is the cunning of reason in a bewitched society. *Negative dialectics* is the presentation of the wrong state of things. It argues that the idea of society as 'subject to natural laws is ideology if it is hypostasized as immutably given by nature' (Adorno, 1990: 355). Instead, it holds that the incomprehensible economic forces find their rational explanation in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice. It thus argues that the relations of economic objectivity manifest the social nature of an inverted [*verkehrte*] and perverted [*verrückte*] world of definite social relations. That is, it amounts 'to a conceptualized praxis [*begriffene Praxis*]' of the capitalist social relations (Schmidt, 1974: 207).

## II Economic abstraction and class

I have argued that Adorno's critical theory holds that society in the form of self-moving economic categories is not intelligible. What remains intelligible is the 'law' of economic autonomization in the form of objectively valid exchange relations between one economic quantity and another (see Adorno, 1976a: 15). The commodity form disappears as a social relationship, and instead asserts an abstract economic logic, which manifests the vanished social subject as a personification of economic categories. The capitalist social subject is a value subject of profitable equivalent exchange relations. The argument of this section expounds the meaning of this last sentence. It starts with an exploration of the contradictory character of profitable equivalent exchange relations. Exchange is either an exchange between equivalent values or it is profitable; in bourgeois society it is both – a contradiction in terms, which is 'immanent to [its] reality' (Adorno, 1976b: 80). It then explores the value subject as a class subject, which entails an argument about class as a negative social category.

In Adorno's argument, the capitalist exchange relations entail a struggle for subsistence on the part of the class tied to work, which is experienced as economic fate. 'The law which determines how the fatality of mankind unfolds itself is the law of exchange' (1976b: 80). The exchange relations are equivalent exchange relations, which entails an exchange between equal values. Between two equal-value things there is no difference or

distinction. Exchange equivalence is entirely abstract in that it is indifferent to the concrete utility of the things that are exchanged. 'There is no difference or distinction in things of equal value. One hundred pounds worth of lead or iron, is of as great a value as one hundred pounds worth of silver or gold.' The one is the 'same as any other' (Marx, 1990: 127–8, 129). The act of an equivalent exchange therefore 'implies the reduction of the products to be exchanged to their equivalents, to something abstract, but by no means – as traditional discussion would maintain – to something material' (Adorno, 1976b: 80). The foundation of value equivalence cannot be found in 'the geometrical, physical, chemical or other natural property of commodities. Such properties come into considerations only to the extent that they make the commodities useful, i.e. turn them into use-values' (Marx, 1990: 139). Value equivalence expresses thus something invisible that is neither divine nor natural in character. Rather, it 'holds sway in reality [*Sache*] itself' (Adorno, 1976b: 80) and becomes visible in the money form, in which the exchange value of a commodity appears as a definite amount of money. The money form manifests thus the 'continually vanishing realisation of value' (Marx, 1973: 209). Once value is expressed in the form of money, it has to be posited again and again to maintain its 'occult ability to add value to itself' (Marx, 1990: 255) – money is thrown into circulation to beget more money in the form of profit, which is realized by means of an equivalent exchange (M . . . M', say £100 = £120). The conceptuality of this 'bewitched' reality is independent 'of the consciousness of the human beings subjected to it' (Adorno, 1976b: 80) at the same time as which it prevails only in and through the social individuals themselves. Failure to make a profit spells ruin and imperils wage-based access to the means of subsistence. And yet, in the form of value, the wealth of nations appears entirely intangible – something abstract acquires value validity in an exchange that appears to be regulated by an invisible hand, beyond human control. What is not validated is devalued and destroyed, regardless of the human needs that could be satisfied. Money validates the value of things. 'Illusion dominates reality' (Adorno, 1976b: 80) and it does so because '[e]xchange value, merely a mental configuration when compared with use value, dominates human needs and replaces them' (ibid.). The struggle for life is a struggle for money. It governs the mentality of bourgeois society as, seemingly, a thing in-itself. For Adorno this character of 'capitalist society is both an actuality *and* at the same time a necessary illusion. The illusion signifies that within this society laws can only be implemented as natural processes over people's heads, while their validity arises from the form of the relations of production within which production takes place' (Adorno, 2008: 118). Understanding of the relations of production is key to unlocking the social constitution of money as the automatic fetish of capitalist wealth.

Adorno's negative dialectics presents the social constitution of the law of value with reference to Marx's concept of socially necessary labour time. In Adorno's words, 'society . . . determined . . . by exchange' entails an 'abstract element' that does not manifest something material in the traditional sense of the word (Adorno, 2000: 31, 80). In fact, what is exchanged are 'average necessary amounts of labour time' (ibid.: 31). This reduction of the product to 'social labour time [necessarily disregards] the specific forms of the object to be exchanged . . . instead they are reduced to a universal unit' (ibid.: 32). Marx's familiar definition of the social constitution of value – 'socially necessary labour time is the labour-time required to produce any use-value under the conditions of

production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society' – expresses the social character of the capitalist form of labour in the form of a universal commensurability of a time made abstract (Marx, 1990: 129). This time appears in homogeneous units that add to themselves, seemingly from time immemorial to eternity. Time appears as a force of its own progress, moving forward relentlessly by adding units of time to itself, as if it were a force of nature that ticks and tocks human life dissociated from the time of actual events. This appearance is real. In capitalism 'time is ontologized' (Adorno, 1990: 331). This ontologized time is the time of value, and the time of value is the time of socially necessary labour. The holy trinity of social labour, socially necessary labour time and value validity in exchange is invisible. Its objectivity is spectral. Nevertheless, the ghostlike objectivity of value becomes visible in the money form; back in production the ghost turns into a vampire that feeds on living labour as the human material of value that begets a surplus and is thus greater than itself (see Bellofiore, 2009: 185). Socially necessary labour time is not fixed and given. The labour time that 'was yesterday undoubtedly socially necessary for the production of a yard of linen, ceases to be so today' (Marx, 1990: 202). Whether the concrete expenditure of labour time is valid as socially necessary labour time can be established only *post-festum* in exchange. On the pain of ruin, the expenditure of living labour is thus done in the hope that it will turn out to be socially necessary and that it will thus achieve value validity in exchange with money. 'Time is money', said Benjamin Franklin, and one might add that therefore money is time. If, then, capitalism reduces everything to time, an abstract time, divisible into equal, homogeneous and constant units that move on from unit to unit, dissociated from concrete human circumstances and purposes, then time really is everything. If '*time is everything, [then] man is nothing; he is, at the most, time's carcass*' (Marx, 1975: 127; emphases added) – a carcass of 'personified labour-time' (Marx, 1990: 352–3). Expenditure of socially valid labour does not occur in its own good time. It occurs within time, that is, the time of value as expenditure of socially necessary labour time. Normality is death. The abstraction of the exchange process 'lies therefore not in the abstracting mode of thought by the sociologist, but in society itself' (Adorno, 2000: 32). It holds sway in reality.<sup>16</sup> That is, 'the conversion of all commodities into labour-time is no greater an abstraction, but is no less real, than the resolution of all organic bodies into air' (Marx, 1971: 30). The time of capitalist labour appears in the form of a profitable accumulation of some abstract form of wealth, of money that yields more money. What cannot be turned into profit is burned.

The capitalist exchange relations posit the exchange of money for more money as an equivalent exchange (M . . . M'). Rather than being taken in by the dazzling appearance of the money subject 'that brings forth living offsprings' (Marx, 1990: 255), it is essential to negate things in their appearance (see Adorno, 1971: 203). What appears in the appearance of an equivalent exchange of money as more money is the 'difference between the labour-time expended by the worker and that needed for the reproduction of his life' (Adorno, 2005: 73). The mysterious character of an equivalent exchange of money for more money has thus to do with the transformation of the commodity labour power into a surplus value producing labour activity (M . . . P . . . M').<sup>17</sup> For the sake of more money, the reduction of the labour time spent by the worker to reproduce her life is

of the essence. It is the condition for extending the labour time beyond the time necessary for the (simple) reproduction of society. This extended labour time comprises the surplus labour time that expands social wealth, creating a surplus in value, the foundation of profit. The understanding, then, of the mysterious character of an equivalence exchange between unequal values lies 'in the concept of surplus value' (Adorno, 1997[1962]: 508). Adorno thus argues that the equivalence exchange relations are founded 'on the class relationship' between the owners of the means of production and the producers of surplus value, and he argues that this social relationship vanishes in its economic appearance as an exchange between one quantity of money and another (ibid.: 506).

Economic thought identifies the properties of economic categories as the revealed truth of society. It recognizes the profitable accumulation of some abstract form of wealth for its own sake, money as more money, as a social necessity. Its falseness contains a social truth. Failure to make a profit entails great danger. To the vanishing point of death, the life of the seller of labour power hangs by the success of turning his labour into a profitable means for another man. The profitability of his labour is the fundamental condition of achieving and sustaining wage-based employment. The class struggle to sustain access to the means of subsistence and maintain labour conditions is relentless. Yesterday's profitable appropriation of some other person's surplus labour buys the labour power of another man today, the buyer for the sake of making another profit so that he avoids bankruptcy by enriching himself, the seller in order to make a living. For the sake of her life, the avoidance of redundancy is a matter of the profitable consumption of her labour power. That is, 'society stays alive, not despite its antagonism, but by means of it' (Adorno, 1990: 320). In distinction to traditional Marxist conceptions, to be a productive labourer is not an ontologically privileged position. 'It is a great misfortune' (Marx, 1990: 644). In *Capital*, Marx develops the capitalist class relations from the sale of the commodity labour power. In truth, however, 'the sale of labour power presupposes coercion as the foundation of its sale' (Adorno, cited in Braunstein, 2011: 217).<sup>18</sup> The labour market is the institution that regulates the economic compulsion to make ends meet in the form of an equal exchange relationship between the traders in labour power. Behind the freedom of labour, there is a daily struggle for securing the means of subsistence by means of wage income. This struggle takes the form of a competition among the sellers of labour power to achieve and maintain that income. For the seller of labour power, competition is not some abstract economic law. Rather, its conceptuality is experienced in the form of precarious labour markets, wage pressure, risk to employment and danger of unemployment, and thus as struggle to maintain access to subsistence.

The economic calculation of the unemployed as economic zeros is not untrue. It makes clear that the life of the traders of labour power really 'hangs by' the profitability extraction of surplus value (Adorno, 1990: 320). Labouring for the sake of a surplus in value is innate to the concept of the worker. She belongs to a system of wealth in which her labour has a utility only as a means of surplus value production; her subsistence depends on it. Sensuous activity not only vanishes in the supersensible world of economic things, it also appears in it – as struggle to avoid the risk of bankruptcy and being cut off from subsistence. The 'movement of society' is thus not only 'antagonistic from the outset' (ibid.: 304). It also 'maintains itself only through antagonism' (ibid.: 311).

That is, the class struggle is the objective necessity of the false society. It belongs to its concept.

Contrary to a whole tradition of Marxist theory, the social relations of production do not harbour within themselves a ‘progressivist’ resolution.<sup>19</sup> They harbour within themselves the needs of profit as the condition of social reproduction. Unprofitable buyers of labour power go out of business; profitable ones maintain demand for labour power. The profitable accumulation of yesterday’s yield of surplus value is the condition of today’s wage-based access to the means of subsistence. The working class struggles not for the sake of abstract ideas. It struggles to make a living. ‘Proletarian language is dictated by hunger. The poor chew words to fill their bellies’ (Adorno, 2005: 102). Class struggle is an entirely negative category. It belongs to the false society. What is false is false. ‘The whole is false’ (ibid.: 50) – the whole has to go.

### III Looking on the bright side of the wronged world

The traditional Marxist idea of a dialectics of theory and practice focuses on the state as instrument of socialist transformation. Under the spell of independent economic forces, it identifies the properties of economic categories as the contingent truth of a balance of class forces and demands a shift in the balance of class forces to achieve a socialist identity of the economic categories.<sup>20</sup> It is, however, pure ideology to reduce economic objectivity to some economic nature and to suggest that its social manifestation is entirely contingent on the balance of forces that act upon it. Adorno dismisses such thought as ‘abstract negativity’ (Adorno, 2008: 25). ‘Abstract negativity’ is the sniffer dog of thought (Bonefeld, 2012). It barks in perpetuity and without bite. It sniffs out the miserable world from the outside, as it were, and leaves reality untouched by thought. Instead of thinking in and through society, it thinks about society. It looks on the bright side and proclaims not only to know how to set things right but, also, how to do so ‘for the workers’ (Adorno, 2008: 25).

Adorno’s negative dialectics of the false society resists the bright side view. It refuses to become ‘a piece of the politics it was supposed to lead out of’ (Adorno, 1990: 143). Negative dialectics is critique of the social relations of economic objectivity. I have argued that, for Adorno’s critical theory, the relationship between economy and society is not an external one. The point of a critical social theory is to explore the ‘inner connection’ (Marx, 1990: 102) between the seemingly distinct spheres of human existence. Economic reproduction is social reproduction. It takes place ‘in and through’ the perverted ‘totality’ in which we live (Adorno, 2008: 47).

Further, I have argued that Adorno’s critical theory holds that the forces of production do not manifest some economic nature. Rather, they manifest ‘congealed relationships, which have become autonomous, objectified vis-à-vis human beings’ (Adorno, 2000: 82). Adorno thus rejects the orthodox conception of a dialectics between the forces of production as some trans-historically active economic nature and the historically specific relations of production as a ‘perverter of Marxian motives’ and criticizes it as ‘metaphysics’. It denies, he argues, the ‘spontaneity of the subject, a *movens* of the objective dialectics of the forces and relations of production’ (Adorno, 1990: 205; original emphasis).<sup>21</sup> He thus argues that the forces of production manifest “‘relationships between

human beings and not, as they appear to us, the properties of things” (Adorno, 2000: 82, quoting Marx). What therefore appears in the appearance of society as an object of economic forces is not some general economic nature that imposes itself behind the backs of the individuals as if by force of nature. Rather, what appear are the actual social relations in the form of independent economic forces. Economic abstractions as such do not exist, except as a negative ontology of ‘perverted’ [*verrückte*] social relations.

Furthermore, I have argued that society as the object of real economic abstractions and society as the subject of a life-world of interpersonal relations comprise one reality. The reality in which the social individuals move day in and day out has no invariant character, that is, something which exists independently from them. As a critical theory of society, the critique of political economy amounts to a conceptualized social praxis in the form of the economic object, that is, the entire meaning of the ‘relations of production resides precisely in the fact that we are here concerned not with direct action but, if you like, congealed action, or with some form of congealed labour’ or with society in the form of independent economic forces (Adorno, 2000: 105). Economic nature is a social nature. Its reality is immanent to its own social context.

Lastly, Adorno’s negative dialectics of economic objectivity amounts to a class theory of the capitalist form of social wealth and its production. Society as the automatic subject of some independent economic forces entails the dependent seller of labour power as the producer of surplus value. Finally, for Adorno, class struggle is not a positive category. Rather, it belongs to a world that is ‘hostile to the subject’ (Adorno, 1990: 167). The critique of class society finds its positive resolution only in the classless society, not in a ‘fairer’ class society. Contrary to the rumour about Adorno’s critical theory, its negative critique of existing conditions does not entail an impoverished praxis. Rather, it entails the question of praxis (Bonefeld, 2015; Stoetzler, 2012). That is, Adorno’s dictum that ‘society remains class struggle’ (1989: 272) does not express something positive or desirable. Rather, it amounts to a judgement on the capitalistically organized social relations of production, in which ‘the needs of human beings, the satisfaction of human beings, is never more than a sideshow’ (Adorno, 2008: 51). The judgement on existence entails the critique of existence. It holds that ‘the abolition of hunger [requires] a change in the relations of production’ (Adorno, 1976a: 62).

## Notes

Elements of the article emerged from reading group discussions of Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*. I am grateful to my colleagues Monica Brito-Vieria, Angie Pepper, Tom O’Shea, Mihaela Mihai and Richard Healey for the many insights that arose from our discussions during the autumn term of 2014. I am also grateful to Helmut Reichelt, Marcel Stoetzler and Patrick Murray for their enthusiastic support and, in the case of Patrick Murray, detailed comments. Liz O’Brien made sure that the article was completed in good time. Finally, I wish to acknowledge the two external reviewers for their detailed comments and say thank you to the special issue editors, Bastian Ronge and Matthias Rothe, for their support.

1. Walter Benjamin (1999: 246) recognizes this tenderness in the fight ‘for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual thing could exist’.

2. According to Martin Jay (1973: 152) ‘Horkheimer and Adorno, however broad the scope of their interests and knowledge, were never really serious students of economics, Marxist or otherwise’. According to Habermas (1983: 109) ‘Adorno was not bothered with political economy’. In the German original this reads as ‘*Mit politischer Ökonomie hat Adorno sich nicht befasst*’ (*Philosophisch-Politische Profile*, [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971], p. 198). In the original text Habermas asserts that political economy was a non-topic for Adorno.
3. The question is Marx’s; see his ‘The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof’ (Marx, 1990: 163–77).
4. Even Weber’s concern about the relationship of economy to society has to all intents and purposes vanished from contemporary sociology. For Weber, this relationship is a central sociological problem. His sociology does, however, not conceptualize the economic categories as historically specific forms of social reproduction. He rather keeps them separate, views them as distinct spheres of action and analyses their interrelationships. These points derive from Adorno (2000).
5. On this, see also Clarke’s (1982) excellent critique.
6. Joan Robinson (1962: 68) expressed the inability of economics to establish itself as a science of economic matter most clearly: ‘K is capital,  $\Delta K$  is investment. Then what is K? Why, capital of course. It must mean something, so let us get on with the analysis, and do not bother about these officious prigs who ask us to say what it means.’ On economics as a science of ‘incomprehensible concepts’ (Robinson, 1962: 88) see also Backhaus (2005) and Bonefeld (2014a: 21–51).
7. For a critique of economic categories, see Backhaus (1992, 2005) and Reichelt (2008). See also Postone (1993) and Bonefeld (2014a).
8. The mistake, says Adorno (1990: 149), ‘in traditional thinking is that identity is taken for the goal’. What is identified and what does the identity of an economic quantity or market position identify? It identifies quantitative differences, which is the measure of success, poverty, or ruin. See Savage, Divine, Cunningham *et al.* (2013) for a most recent attempt to identify the social classes. For a critique of the sociological identification of class, see Bonefeld (2002).
9. This part of the argument is in line with Lotz’s (2014) account. However, in distinction, Lotz (*ibid.*: 22) holds that Adorno ‘identifies capitalism with the exchange principle’ and that he therefore did not conceptualize the class-divided character of the capitalist social relations, as I set out to argue in this article. I owe this point to Patrick Murray.
10. On the invisible character of ‘economic’ value, see Bellofiore (2009) and Bonefeld (2010).
11. The actual relations of life are the non-conceptual premise of the economic categories. On this, see also Marx (1990: 493–4, n. 4).
12. According to Adorno (1990: 197), ‘Horkheimer’s phrasing “critical theory” . . . seeks not to make materialism acceptable but to use it to make men theoretically conscious of what it is that distinguishes materialism – distinguishes it from amateurish explications of the world as much as from the “traditional theory” of science’.
13. Adorno’s (1990: 190, 114, 85) point that ‘reification is the reflexive form of false objectivity’ says that ‘the protest against reification becomes reified, divorced from thinking, and irrational’ as an affirmation of society as an object ‘in itself’. For a detailed account, see Bonefeld (2014a: 53–75).

14. The term 'sensuous-supersensible thing' cannot be found in the English edition of *Capital*. Marx uses the formulation *sinnlich übersinnlich* twice in the German edition of *Kapital* (1979: 85, 86), and once in his *Zur Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie* (1981: 29). The English version of *Capital* translates it first as 'transcendent' and then as 'sensuous things, which are at the same time suprasensible or social' (Marx, 1990: 163, 165) and the English version of the *Critique* translates it as 'an abstract thing' (Marx, 1971: 42). I translate *sinnlich übersinnlich* as 'sensuous-supersensible' in accordance with the English version of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, where *übersinnlich* is translated as 'supersensible'. For a detailed account, see Reichelt (2005).
15. Translations from original German sources are the author's.
16. According to Sohn-Rethel (1978), who first advanced the notion of real abstraction, real abstraction amounts to a real, concrete process. In Adorno's terminology, the objective conceptuality of society comprises a real abstraction of seemingly self-moving economic categories that, although socially constituted in their entirety, impose themselves on the acting subject as if by force of nature. On this see Reichelt (2005). On Adorno's debt to Sohn-Rethel's interpretation of real abstraction see Reichelt (2002: 181, n. 5).
17. M...P...M' and M...M' are classical expressions for, first, the transformation of Money into the Production of essentially surplus value that is realized in exchange in the form of greater amount of Money that expresses the extracted surplus value in the form of profit. Second, the formula M...M' expresses the exchange relationship between Money and more Money, say, £100 [M] = £120 [M']. See Bonefeld (1996) for a fuller account.
18. On coercion as the secret force of the law of value, see Bonefeld (2011).
19. On this, see Benjamin (1999) and Adorno (2008). See also Bonefeld (2014b).
20. For a most recent attempt at reducing economic objectivity to economic nature and at 'freeing' socialist politics from the 'economic base', see the contributions to part 6 of the volume edited by Jaeggi and Loick (2013).
21. Adapted from the German original (Adorno, 1992: 205). The English version translates 'relations of production as 'conditions', which obscures his argument.

## References

- Adorno, T. (1969) *Stichworte, Kritische Modelle 2* [Keywords: Critical Models 2]. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Adorno, T. (1971) *Drei Studien zu Hegel* [Hegel: Three Studies], in *Gesammelte Schriften* [Collected Writings], vol. 5. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Adorno, T. (1975) *Gesellschaftstheorie und Kulturkritik* [Social Theory and Critique of Culture]. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Adorno, T. (1976a) 'Introduction', trans. G. Adey and D. Frisby, in T. Adorno, H. Albert, R. Darendorf, J. Habermas, J. Pilot and K. Popper, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*. London: Heinemann, pp. 1–67.
- Adorno, T. (1976b) 'Sociology and Empirical Research', trans. G. Adey, D. Frisby, T. Adorno, H. Albert, R. Darendorf, J. Habermas, J. Pilot and K. Popper, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*. London: Heinemann, pp. 68–86.
- Adorno, T. (1976c) 'On the Logic of the Social Sciences', trans. G. Adey, D. Frisby, T. Adorno, H. Albert, R. Darendorf, J. Habermas, J. Pilot and K. Popper, *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*. London: Heinemann, pp. 105–22.

- Adorno, T. (1989) 'Society', trans. F. Jameson, in E. Bronner and D. Kellner (eds) *Critical Theory and Society*. London: Routledge, pp. 267–75.
- Adorno, T. (1990) *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton. London: Routledge.
- Adorno, T. (1992) *Negative Dialektik* [Negative Dialectics]. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Adorno, T. (1997[1962]) 'Seminar Mitschrift von 1962' [Seminar Notes from 1962], Appendix to H. G. Backhaus, *Dialektik der Wertform* [Dialectics of the Value Form]. Freiburg: Ça Ira, pp. 501–13.
- Adorno, T. (2000) *Introduction to Sociology*, ed. C. Goedde, trans. E. Jephcott. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Adorno, T. (2005) *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. Jephcott. London: Verso.
- Adorno, T. (2008) *Lectures on History and Freedom*, ed. R. Tiedemann, trans. R. Livingstone. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Backhaus, H. G. (1992) 'Between Philosophy and Science: Marxian Social Economy as Critical Theory', trans. G. Finlayson and U. Haase, in W. Bonefeld, R. Gunn and K. Psychopedis (eds) *Open Marxism*, vol. I. London: Pluto Press, pp. 54–92.
- Backhaus, H. G. (2005) 'Some Aspects of Marx's Concept of Critique in the Context of his Economic-Philosophical Theory', trans. W. Bonefeld, in W. Bonefeld and K. Psychopedis (eds) *Human Dignity, Social Autonomy and the Critique of Capitalism*. Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, pp. 13–29.
- Bellofiore, R. (2009) 'A Ghost Turning into a Vampire', in R. Bellofiore and R. Fineschi (eds) *Re-reading Marx, New Perspectives after the Critical Edition*. London: Palgrave, pp. 178–94.
- Benjamin, W. (1999) 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. and intro. H. Arendt, trans. H. Zorn. London: Pimlico, pp. 245–55.
- Bonefeld, W. (1996) 'Money, Equality and Exploitation', in W. Bonefeld and J. Holloway (eds) *Global Capital, National State and the Politics of Money*. London: Palgrave, pp. 178–209.
- Bonefeld, W. (2002) 'Capital, Labour and Primitive Accumulation. On Class and Constitution', in A. C. Dinerstein and M. Neary (eds) *The Labour Debate: An Investigation into the Theory and Reality of Capitalist Work*. Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, pp. 65–88.
- Bonefeld, W. (2010) 'Abstract Labour: Against its Nature and on its Time', *Capital & Class* 34(2): 257–76.
- Bonefeld, W. (2011) 'Primitive Accumulation and Capitalist Accumulation', *Science & Society* 75(3): 379–99.
- Bonefeld, W. (2012) 'From Humanity to Nationality to Bestiality: A Polemic on Alternatives without Conclusion', *Ephemera* 12(4): 445–553.
- Bonefeld, W. (2014a) *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Bonefeld, W. (2014b) 'Critical Theory, History, and the Question of Revolution', in S. Brincat (ed.) *Communism in the 21st Century*, vol. III. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, pp. 137–61.
- Bonefeld, W. (2015) 'Bringing Critical Theory back in at a Time of Misery: Three Beginnings without Conclusion', *Capital & Class*; accessible online @: doi: 10.1177/0309816815603157
- Braunstein, D. (2011) *Adornos Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* [Adorno's Critique of Political Economy]. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.
- Clarke, S. (1982) *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology*. London: Macmillan.

- Habermas, J. (1983) *Philosophical-political Profiles*. London: Heinemann.
- Horkheimer, M. (1992a) 'Kritische und Traditionelle Theorie' [Critical and Traditional Theory], in M. Horkheimer, *Kritische und Traditionelle Theorie* [Critical and Traditional Theory]. Frankfurt: Fischer, pp. 205–59.
- Horkheimer, M. (1992b) 'Nachtrag' [Postscript], in M. Horkheimer, *Kritische und Traditionelle Theorie* [Critical and Traditional Theory]. Frankfurt: Fischer, pp. 261–9.
- Jaeggi, R. and Loick, D., eds (2013) *Nach Marx: Philosophie, Kritik, Praxis* [After Marx: Philosophy, Critique, Praxis]. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Jay, M. (1973) *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923–1950*. London: University of California Press.
- Lotz, C. (2014) *The Capitalist Schema*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Marcuse, H. (1988) *Negations*. London: Free Association Press.
- Marx, K. (1966) *Capital*, vol. III. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Marx, K. (1971) *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Marx, K. (1973) *Grundrisse*. Harmondsworth, Mx: Penguin.
- Marx, K. (1975) 'The Poverty of Philosophy', in *Collected Works*, vol. 6. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Marx, K. (1979) *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* [Capital: Critique of Political Economy], MEW [Marx–Engels Works], vol. 23. Berlin: Dietz.
- Marx, K. (1981) *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* [A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy], MEW [Marx–Engels Works], vol. 13. Berlin: Dietz.
- Marx, K. (1990) *Capital*, vol. I. Harmondsworth, Mx: Penguin.
- Postone, M. (1993) *Time, Labour and Social Domination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Reichelt, H. (2002) 'Die Marxsche Kritik ökonomischer Kategorien. Überlegungen zum Problem der Geltung in der dialektischen Darstellungsmethode im "Kapital"' [Marx's Critique of Economic Categories: Reflections on the Problem of Validity in the Dialectical Method of Presentation in 'Capital'], in I. Fetscher and A. Schmidt (eds) *Emancipation als Versöhnung: zu Adornos Kritik der Warentausch-Gesellschaft und Perspektiven der Transformation* [Emancipation as Reconciliation: On Adorno's Critique of Commodity-Exchange Society and Perspectives of Transformation]. Frankfurt: Verlag Neue Kritik, pp. 142–90.
- Reichelt, H. (2005) 'Social Reality as Appearance: Some Notes on Marx's Conception of Reality', trans. W. Bonefeld, in W. Bonefeld and K. Psychopedis (eds) *Human Dignity: Social Autonomy and the Critique of Capitalism*. Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, pp. 31–67.
- Reichelt, H. (2008) *Die neue Marxlektüre* [The New Reading of Marx]. Hamburg: VSA.
- Robinson, J. (1962) *Economic Philosophy: An Essay on the Progress of Economic Thought*. London: Watts.
- Savage, M., Devine, F., Cunningham, N. et al (2013) 'A New Model of Social Class? Findings from the BBC's Great Class Survey Experiment', *Sociology* 47(2): 219–50.
- Schmidt, A. (1974) 'Praxis' [Practice], in *Gesellschaft: Beiträge zur Marxschen Theorie 2* [Society: Contributions to Marxian Theory 2]. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, pp. 264–308.
- Sohn-Rethel, A. (1978) *Intellectual and Manual Labour*. London: Macmillan.
- Stoetzler, M. (2012) 'On the Possibility that the Revolution that Will End Capitalism Might Fail to Usher in Communism', *Journal of Classical Sociology* 12(2): 191–204.

**Author biography**

**Werner Bonefeld** teaches in the Department of Politics at the University of York (UK). Recent publications have included *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy* (2014) and *Notes from Tomorrow* (2015). With Michael Heinrich he coedited *Kapital & Kritik* (2011). He is currently working on a book about ordoliberalism and, with Beverley Best, Chris O’Kane and Neil Larsen, he is coediting a three-volume Handbook of Critical Theory.