

EDITORIAL

The importance of critical social theory of the sciences today

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Kar Marx's critique of political economy is a cornerstone of modern culture and is and remains one of the most fruitful analyses of capitalist society. Understanding the role of this critique in grasping current political, social and economic issues is essential. The following are some of the aspects we would like to address in this editorial for *Katálysis Journal*: 1) the relationship between essence and appearance; 2) the relationship between reality and possibility; 3) the matter of the subject and social transformation.

Regarding the first point mentioned, the relationship between essence and appearance, we refer to a well-known line from Marx in the third volume of *The Capital*, where he states that if essence and appearance coincided, science would not be necessary¹. The investigation of what is visible allows us to understand that it is the manifestation of a deeper thing; if we confine ourselves to reconstructing merely the regularities of appearance without connecting them to the laws that rule them, we are trapped in the capital and commodity fetishism and its phenomenal disguises. These disguises appear to us as natural, as if there could not be any alternative to the capitalist system, as if current forms were permanent, a "social nature". The critique enables us to learn that human social organizations have not always been identical, that different forms have alternated in their history and that capitalism is just one of them. If capitalism has a different present and past, it could also have an alternative future. Particularly, the critique explains the fundamental categories, without which we don't believe it is possible to conceptualize contemporary reality, are not inherent conditions of nature; on the contrary, they are products of social unfolding and, as such, can be modified. For example, it seems "natural" to us that all products - human beings included - are commodities, or that money has a social power, or that capital becomes the subject of every social act; rather, they are historically determined social relations.

A fundamental component of the Marxian critique of the commodity and money² is the undermining of the individual's centrality as the prime social subject, as if society resulted from the sum of individual decisions. On the contrary, the people interacting in the mercantile system define themselves as such

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only as members, parts of a social unit. Marx shows how the surface appearance - the atomized subjects who build society as a collection of individual choices - is precisely the reversal of the essential nature of society as a totality of structural connections and interdependence. The entire bourgeois ideology, now dominant, is founded on this matter of the substantial individual, on destroying the very concept of society and, hence, its responsibility towards its members. The appearance of the atomized being of individuals is the exact necessary result of the essential laws of the capitalist mode of production, the universal connection between its members appears as their autonomized independence; and their connection appears as a relationship of things with social power, social things and independent individuals. The critique must not only show the false nature of the ideological issues of dominant thought, but equally provide an explanation of how the structure of capitalism proposes these ideologies as inevitable forms of its manifestation (MARX, 2013, p. 154).

Capitalism operates under stringent laws that drive inevitable logical and historical changes. However, the presence of these necessary mechanisms within capitalist reproduction does not mean that this imperative is natural. Rather, it is a historically determined necessity that can be reshaped by the very actors who perpetuate it, leading to the creation of a new, more rational, and equitable social structure. This transformation, though, cannot happen by chance; it must respond to and fulfill the demands of historical necessity. Marx also emphasizes that throughout history, humans do not act merely as individuals but as members of broader social classes, challenging the ideology centered on the individual subject.

Continuing with our analysis, it is important to examine the relationship between reality and possibility. The viability of this transformation—specifically, the shift from one historically determined form to another—is indeed real. The changes introduced by the capitalist mode of production have paved the way for the potential transition to a new, more rational social system. A critical examination of capitalism’s actual development equips us with the essential prerequisites for this transition. Capitalism has produced historical outcomes that enable us to conceive of a more varied future: 1) the universal interdependence of human reproduction (which has been ideologically reframed as globalization). For the first time in history, this interconnectedness has established a concept of humanity that transcends intellectual or theoretical abstraction and becomes a practical reality: the survival and reproduction of individuals in one region are structurally dependent on the reproduction of individuals in other regions; 2) the remarkable productivity of labor, which has made it feasible to break free from the severe dependence on the past and on necessity, and has created the potential to transcend external necessity (although it has also introduced the risk of complete environmental destruction); 3) the advancement of scientific knowledge, techniques, and technologies that enable the management of the complex global process of reproduction. Critique helps us differentiate the progressive side of capitalist development from its destructive one. This positive material content emerged during capitalism’s progressive phase. However, it is now constrained by its despotic form, as capitalism has reached a point where it is no longer compatible with further progress. The possibilities created during capitalism’s progressive phase are now obstructed by its own inherent laws. The capitalist mode of reproduction has entered into conflict with the very content it once produced (MAZZONE, 1987).

It is evident that an alternative organization of human reproduction is achievable. However, the mere existence of this real possibility does not mean it is currently being realized. The challenge lies in turning this potential into a reality in process, which can be pursued as a political and social goal. The issue of political structures and organizational methods that enable a new society to emerge from the old is central to the theoretical and practical focus of critical analysis. This element of the subject is as essential as its objective transformations.

Finally, it is crucial to reflect on the relationship between the subject and social transformation. Does a critical understanding of the processes make it possible to individualize the subjects of social transformation? It appears that the traditional view, which regarded the working class as the sole privileged subject, requires reassessment. This reconsideration is necessary not only because capitalism has evolved into a far more complex system than in Marx’s era but also because reducing Marx’s theory to such a narrow interpretation seems inadequate. In his theory, the “other” of capital is not the factory worker but rather the wage laborer. The German term “Arbeiter” translates literally to “laborer,” which can refer to both workers and, more broadly, to laborers. The capitalist mode of production shapes the characteristics of labor practices, and while the historical figures and periods may vary, the underlying logical forms and functional determinations remain consistent. The consistent forms across different scenarios are: the cooperative nature of work, its partial nature, and the role of the worker as an appendage in the capital valorization process. These forms are present in various

historical contexts where capital valorization manifests differently over time. As a result, these forms are observable not only in traditional factories but also in many modern “irregular” production settings. Despite the historical variations in figures, the process of capital valorization remains the overarching goal, evolving in a manner consistent with the system’s logic. Critique enables us to identify these forms within different figures or to view figures as specific examples of these forms.

At the same time, while this is the way in which work is presented to laborers who are included in the production process, many others are left out. In fact, the unemployment rate caused by capitalism is increasing steadily, determining the question of inclusion in the process of emancipation of individuals who, even if they are not laborers, are nevertheless included in the process as a whole, in a position of relative exclusion because of capital. Their exclusion from the process is determined by the process itself and their structural inability to play an active role in the reproduction of the collectivity. In its declining phase, capitalism cannot replicate the progressive period it experienced earlier in Europe. Alongside exploited laborers, there is an expanding group of unemployed workers in regions where the capitalist economy is active. Additionally, there is a third category: workers in countries that have never been fully integrated into capitalist reproduction and likely never will be, as capitalism now lacks the capacity for further expansion due to the structural crisis of valorization it faces. These laborers have not and will not experience the progressive phase of capitalism; their working conditions will remain pre-capitalist. This situation persists within a global context marked by the crisis of twilight capitalism³.

Much of the world has only experienced the brutality and barbarism of capitalism. One misguided response might be a complete rejection of capitalism, including its positive contributions, leading to a primitivism that negates the advancements and possibilities created by capitalism itself. Critique allows us to differentiate between the progressive aspects and the regressive forms of capitalism. The danger lies in embracing anti-modernist ideologies and reactionary (anti) anti-capitalism, which could potentially shift toward right-wing rather than left-wing outcomes.

The challenge for critical theory is to identify practical and institutional forms that enable these diverse subjects to unite politically as a cohesive force. These subjects include: 1) wage laborers who contribute to capital in cooperative roles, partial work, or as appendage (beyond factory settings), 2) the functionally unemployed who are marginalized by the capitalist system, and 3) those who have been only marginally involved in capitalism and will remain so due to its limited capacity for expansion. Uniting these potentially antagonistic groups represents a major historical and political challenge and is a central concern of critical theory.

In summary, the dynamics of twilight capitalism involve structural contradictions that could either lead to the system’s collapse or facilitate a progressive transition out of it. The potential for this transition depends on the working class’s ability to organize effectively. This requires not only finding ways to unify seemingly disparate groups but also situating this struggle within the broader historical development of capitalism. We believe that Marxian theory remains relevant and offers a valuable perspective for understanding contemporary social, political, and economic realities.

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Notes

- ¹ MARX, K. (1894), *O Capital. Crítica da Economia Política, Livro III: O Processo Global da Produção Capitalista*, São Paulo, Boitempo, 2017, p. 1061 (MARX, 2017). Uma distinção inspirada na lógica da essência hegeliana: HEGEL, G. W. F. *Wissenschaft der Logik*, vol. I, t. I, *Die objektive Logik: Erstes Buch*; vol. II, t. I, *Die objektive Logik: Zweites Buch*; t. II, *Die subjektive Logik*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1996, II, p. 161 (HEGEL, 1996).
- ² For a general presentation of the novelty in Marxian research after the new historical-critical publication, see: FINESCHI, R. *Un nuevo Marx: filología e interpretación tras la nueva edición histórico-crítica*. Barcelona: El viejo topo, 2023 (FINESCHI, 2023a).
- ³ On this category, see: FINESCHI, R. *Violência e estrutura social no capitalismo crepuscular*. In: *Os direitos não cabem no estado: trabalho e política social no capitalismo*. Unisa, 2023 (FINESCHI, 2023b). Um tema que também foi abordado por JAMESON, F. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Post-Contemporary Interventions)*, Duke University Press; First Edition, 1992 (JAMESON, 1992).

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