Chain Reaction: Critical Theory Needs Critical Mass—Contradiction, Crisis and the Value-Form

Mike Neary, University of Lincoln, UK, mneary@lincoln.ac.uk

Krysztof Szadkowski and Jakub Krzeski have written a significant paper, *In, Against and Beyond: A Marxist Critique for Higher Education in Crisis* (2019), setting out a critical framework ‘to render visible what lies beyond the current form of higher education’ (1). Their critical framework attempts to reveal the trigger for ‘a chain reaction’ (4), setting off a process for the ‘radical transformation of higher education and the way in which knowledge is produced and disseminated’ (2). The purpose of their critique is to “bring about self-rulled, democratically organised global, national and local networks of co-operation in science” (10) and realise ‘a future free from capitalist domination’ (5).

The framework is grounded in critical theory linked to on-going practical struggles in the UK against the neo-liberal university: a national pension strike by academics and plans to develop a co-operative university. This chain reaction, they argue, generates ‘a condition of possibility…[which]…could, in principle, dissolve the dichotomy between theory and practice’ (11). In this way Szadkowski and Krzeski claim to provide ‘a more careful reassessment of the contours of the crisis of the university’ (2) than have been offered up until now by academics from ‘across the political spectrum’ (2). Their paper adds a crucial Marxist sensibility to the emerging academic sub-discipline of critical university studies to which Szadkowski has already made an important contribution (Szadkowski 2015).

**Open Marxism**

Szadkowski and Krzeski’s theoretical framework is based on a critical engagement with Open Marxism, a version of Marxist social theory that emerged in the 1980s, against mainstream Marxism’s deterministic view of historical development and Althusserian structuralism (Bonefeld et al 1992, Dinerstein 2015). Open Marxism’s radical epistemology is grounded in Theodore Adorno’s concept of negative dialectics: ‘the ontology of the wrong state of things’ (Adorno 1990, 11), as a way of theorising how to rupture the capitalist status quo. However, while recognising the significance of Open Marxism, Szadkowski and Krzeski want to avoid dialectic thinking which, they maintain, has a tendency towards reconciliation and resolution in favour of capital, and focus on what they conceive to be the basis of the contradictory structure of capitalism, the conflict between labour and capital, prioritising class struggle as the driver for crisis and critique.

Szadkowski and Krzeski’s engagement with Open Marxism is compelling, but their focus on the conflict between labour and capital as the motivation for contradiction is at risk of reproducing mainstream critical higher education studies, a way of theorising they are anxious to avoid. The working class, represented in their paper as a sociological category is typical of bourgeois social science, and, therefore, cannot generate the critical mass to blast capitalism into a communist continuum.

In this response to their paper, I will identity a more substantive basis for the critical mass that is already setting off a revolutionary chain reaction. This more substantive analysis is grounded not in living labour as the revolutionary subject, but through an exposition of
Marx’s explosive critique of the value-form, as the critical component for communism. The value-form is the key category of contradiction for Open Marxism as well as for other variants of Marxism, referred to as a new reading of Marx. This focus on the value-form requires a high level of theoretical abstraction, but this is no abstract theorising; rather, a theory of abstraction brought to life through the forms in which the violence of capitalist abstraction remains in force, while creating the conditions for its own self-destruction (Kay and Mott 1982). I will bring this theory of abstraction to life by reworking one of the practical examples of resistance discussed by Szadkowski and Krzeski: the on-going plans to develop a co-operative university in the UK.

Szadkowski and Krzeski approach the rupture of capitalist social forms through what they refer to as ‘a double perspective’, contra Adorno’s negative dialectic. They set out this double perspective as the standpoint of capital and the standpoint of labour. They want to focus on labour with the intention of liberating living labour from domination by capital. They argue there are no dialectical laws that drive capitalism forward, rather, they prioritise the antagonistic relationship between capital and labour ‘the very relation between capital and living labour is purely conflictual’ (4-5) and, quoting from Michael Hardt and Toni Negri (1994), as the struggle by two classes for ‘domination and the desire for liberation’ (7). They are clear that what they refer to as living labour cannot be subsumed within ‘the homogenising abstraction of capital’ (5). While labour is ‘within and against capital’ there is always ‘the possibility of going beyond it’ (10), giving substance to their critical framework: in, against and beyond.

A Chain Reaction

The chain reaction metaphor is well made but their version of the double perspective does not provide the revolutionary social science needed to detonate the explosive value-form, or provide the critical theory to show how revolutionary fission can be enhanced. Also, their attachment to the notion of perspective is, as I will show, a social theory of seeing and perceiving that deals with the alienated appearance of things, unable to penetrate the dynamic structures that lie beneath the surface of the capitalist life-world. A more revolutionary account of the critical mass needed to sustain a chain reaction can be done through a review of what has become known as ‘the new reading of Marx’ (Heinrich 2004), including Open Marxism as a key variation of this approach. While there is a tendency in versions of Open Marxism, for example the work of John Holloway (2002), to privilege a transthistorical sociological version of living labour (Kurz 2007), there is a more negative critical strain in which labour is problematised as a manifestation of the value-form (Bonefeld 2014).

What is significant about these negative variations is that they argue not from the perspective of labour, but rather their theorisation is based on an immanent critique of the value-form. This new reading of Marx is derived from Adorno’s systematic understanding of the totalising dominance of exchange-value, as an impersonal form of social domination (Neary 2017). Adorno’s critique of capitalism is not from any particular perspective; but, rather, a critique of society as a whole. Workers cannot be relied on to be the subject of revolution as...
they are an intrinsic part of the society that dominates them (Adorno 1962). Werner Bonefeld describes this approach not from the perspective of labour but as ‘a critique of the capitalist form of wealth and its production … including the category of labour’ (2014, 3). Bonefeld finds the negative moment in critical theory not from a transhistorical understanding of living labour, but following Adorno, in ‘the constituted untruth of the world’ (Bonefeld 2014, 40).

The negative principle is not anti-capitalist: not simply against bankers nor for workers, neither of whom ‘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’ (2014, 195); rather, ‘it is a critique of capitalistically organised social forms of human reproduction that assume the form of the movement of economic things, which objectify themselves in the person’ (2014, 196). The presentation of living labour as the subject of revolution understands labour in a form that is contrary to Marx’s historical materialism: as a transhistorical and naturalised form of human existence, fetishised as if it were already made, prior to taking up its central role as the agent against capitalist social forms.

This new reading of Marx is substantiated by the work of Moishe Postone. He provides a critical reappraisal of Marx’s social theory, against the transhistorical fetishisation of labour; not from the perspective of labour, but from the standpoint of ‘a critique of labour in capitalism’ (1993, 5). In a critical review of Gyorgy Lukac’s writing, Postone (2003) argues that the promotion of the working class as the revolutionary subject presents a false dichotomy. Lukacs presents labour as if it were distinct from capital, with labour a transhistorical form of human subjectivity that must be liberated from capital in order that the real nature of labour as wealth creator can be revealed.

Postone points to a more constitutive relationship underpinning the capital relation: not only is labour constitutive of capital, but capital is constitutive of labour. As such, it is capital not labour that constitutes the revolutionary subject. Postone reminds us that for Marx, capital is ‘value in motion’, whereby it is

\[
\text{[C]onstantly changing from one form into another without becoming lost in this movement; it thus transforms itself into an automatic subject … In truth, however, value is here the subject of a process in which, while constantly assuming the form of money and of commodities, it changes its own magnitude … and thus valorises itself … For the movement in the course of which it adds surplus value is its own movement, its valorisation and is therefore self-valorisation … [Value] suddenly presents itself as a self-moving substance which passes through a process of its own and in which the commodity and money are both mere forms. (Postone 2003, 9 from Capital 1990, Volume 1, 255-256).}
\]

Marx is identifying capital as subject, but it is a very remarkable subject, without an ego or self-consciousness (Postone 1993, 77). It is this contradiction between the substantive forms
of value: capital and labour, that provides the dynamic that underpins the emancipatory moment on which the communist continuum depends.

For Postone, following Marx, the revolutionary dynamic lies not in a double *perspective* between capital and labour, but, rather, in the double *character* of labour, its existence as both concrete (use-value) and abstract labour (value), as forms of the value-relation. Marx said his identification of the dual nature of labour was his most important discovery (Marx 1987). He sets this discovery out in chapter 1, volume 1 of *Capital* in his analysis of the commodity-form, including the commodity-form of labour and money, as forms of the value-relation. In this dualistic concept of commodification, *concrete labour (use value)* provides specific useful goods and services to satisfy human needs; *abstract labour (value)* is what is commensurate about labour, generalised labour, providing a social measure and standard of equivalence through which capitalist value can be recognised in the process of exchange.

For Marx, abstract labour is the substance of capitalist value measured as a unit of social labour time: not the time taken to produce a particular commodity by an individual worker, but the amount of time taken to produce a commodity in relation to the normal time taken to produce a commodity with regard to levels of productivity across society. Under the compulsion of capital as subject, abstract labour undermines any rational encounter between a process of production and the full development of human potential (Kay and Mott 1982).

It is within the relationship between use value and value: the abstract and the concrete, that the contradiction of capital: the emancipatory event, is generated. This is what is meant by an immanent critique. The attempt to promote living labour as if it were the revolutionary subject amounts to nothing less than the promotion of labour in what is an already alienated social form.

An important aspect of Postone’s work is his understanding of time and its relationship to labour, not only as a measure of capitalist value, but as a structural limitation. Postone introduces the concept of anachronism as a dynamic temporal principle, to demonstrate, after Marx, capital’s inherent tendency to self-destruct. The competition between capitalists leads to the intensification of the labour process, with machines expelling labour from the production process along with a tendency for overproduction.

The problem for capital is that as abstract labour is the substance of value, removing labour from the process of production through automation does create more material wealth but does not produce surplus value. Postone argues, following Marx, that through this contradictory process capitalist value becomes anachronistic in the sense that it is possible to satisfy human needs and capacities through the production of material wealth that is not dependent on the expansion of capitalist value.

A fundamental principle of classical political economy is that machines transfer their own value into commodities but do not directly generate surplus value during the process of production. This creates a situation in which while more material wealth is created the amount of capitalist value is diminished. This means not only mountains of unsold
commodities, but, at the same time, a recognition at the level of society that the processes of capitalist production can be repurposed to satisfy human needs and capacities in ways that enhance rather than undermine human life (Kay and Mott 1982). For Postone, then, revolution is not the triumph of labour but the abolition of the capitalist value and the creation of a new form of social wealth. The material dynamic that underpins capitalist civilisation enables a version of critical thought to flourish which suggests another form of society is possible.

Postone is clear, this contradictory dialectic, grounded in the value-form, including its temporal dimension, provides the space to consider the efficacy of types of protest and social movements, including the labour movement, that point towards the abolition of capitalism, while, at the same time, maintaining the focus on generic capacity of labour, qua abstract labour, as the organising principle of capitalist society in a way that points towards its dissolution.

**Critique of Value**

This new reading of Marx is further enhanced by another interpretation of Marx, known as the ‘Critique of Value’, that emerged in Germany after the collapse of the Berlin Wall (Larsen et al 2014). Advocates of the Critique of Value take as their starting point Marx’s remarks in the Grundrisse that labour is already an abstraction (Marx 1993, 105; Neary 2017): the ability to conceptualise all purposeful activity as labour is only possible in a world where labour has been generalised as the organising principle of capitalist society (Larsen et al 2014, x). This undermines Szadkowski and Krzeski’s claim that ‘living labour cannot be subsumed within ‘the homogenising abstraction of capital’ (5). The Critique of Value approach recognises the ambivalence in Marx’s writing between labour as the subject of revolution and the critique of labour through an exposition of the value-form that is a feature of his mature work. They refer to this ambivalence as *exoteric* and *esoteric* versions of Marx.

The esoteric account focuses on the industrial proletariat’s struggle over higher wages and worker rights as well as trade union democratisation. The labour movement has made important achievements, but only within capitalist social forms and as part of their development (Jappe 2014). The esoteric account, after Adorno, focuses on the totalising transcendental nature of capital, as an impersonal form of social domination, without an ego or self-consciousness, with money as the supreme form of social power (Clarke 1988). For the esoteric Marx, a workers’ revolution is ‘a logical impossibility’ (Jappe 2014, 29). For advocates of the Critique of Value ‘There can only be a revolution against the subjection of society and individuals to the logic of valorisation and abstract labour’ (Jappe 2014, 29).

Reflecting on this turn towards an esoteric reading of Marx, Kurz argues that this is not a result of the greater sophistication of Critique of Value theorists, but the result of the failure of the industrial proletariat and the collapse of Soviet style communism. A distinctive aspect of the Critique of Value approach is not, after Postone, that the value-form is becoming anachronistic, but that capital has already reached the limits of its capacity for self
valorisation, following the end of Fordism in the 1970s. Since then, capital has been able to maintain itself only through the deregulation of money, financialisation, credit and debt.

Kurz discounts the ways in which bourgeois theorising, grounded in enlightenment thinking, has contaminated revolutionary thought: freedom of labour and equality are the principles of a marketised society, and lack the intellectual capacity to theorise the communist future. Taken together the emergence of value-form as the focus of critical theory represents itself ‘as the first historical recognition of a profound historical rupture’ and a very significant development in Marxist scholarship (Jappe 2014, 33).

**Marx, Value, and the Co-operative University**

Krystian Szadkowski and Jakub Krzeski illustrate their argument with reference to the creation of a co-operative university as a form of resistance to the neo-liberal university, described within their framework of the conflict between capital and labour. They cite the work that I have been doing with my friend and colleague Joss Winn to develop a co-operative university, paying attention our theoretical formulation: ‘co-operatives do not presume the direct abolition of capital forms, rather they contribute to the development and advancement of new co-operative forms of social wealth, that would go beyond the form of property and labour’ (10). This point about the development of a new form of social wealth against capitalist value is well made, but they do not develop our analysis in relation to our focus on the value-form.

In our work (Neary and Winn 2017), we point explicitly to the version of Marx characterised as a new reading of Marx in which capital, rather than labour, is the revolutionary subject after Postone, Bonefeld and the Critique of Value. In our work, we describe this revolutionary process as the ‘value-vortex’ (Dyer-Witheford 2015) to illustrate the dynamic contradiction that sustains the capital relation and its institutional forms, including the capitalist university. The value-vortex is a more energetic and transformatory notion than Szadkowski and Krzeski’s use of the concept of ‘vicious circle’ (10) as a way to describe the crisis of capitalist higher education in the UK. (Please refer to a larger version of this image at the end of the article.)

![Image of the value-vortex by Sam Randall in Neary and Winn, 2017](image-url)
The value-vortex shows the source of contradiction and crisis emerging from within the capital relation, not labour and capital as separate conflictual entities, but as constitutive elements of the value-form. The value-form is materialised as class struggle, contained for now by capitalist public and private regulation, leading to the emergence of radical social movements as well as socially useful knowledge.

The value-vortex generates concepts of resistance, alternative organisational models and transitional pathways to communism. The value-vortex is presented in this way to illustrate the point that it is theoretically and practically possible to recalibrate the capital relation, whereby abstract labour rather than labour and capital is the focus for revolutionary struggle, not to affirm labour, but to abolish labour in all of its forms and establish new types of social value. Krystian Szadkowski and Jakub Krzeski do refer to value, but only in terms of co-operative moral and ethical values, which should be encouraged within the public sector. These co-operative values, which include, self-help, self-responsibility and equality are important; but following Kurz, there is a need to critically recognise that these ideal values have emerged out of a market-based society, and that more substantial critical concepts are necessary to drive the movement towards communism.

**The Problem of Perspective**

The article by Krystian Szadkowski and Jakub Krzeski is important because it resets the focus of critical university studies away from dominant discourse of contesting privatisation and neoliberalism based on the idea of the university as a public good (Meyerhoff 2019, 28), but there is a danger, with the promotion of a labour perspective, of affirming the bourgeois sensibility they mean to critique. This bourgeois sensibility involves not only their formulation of labour, but also the concept of perspective, which Szadkowski and Krzeski use to frame their critical interpretation of capital.

The theory of perspective has bourgeois antecedents that run counter to the immanent critique Szadkowski and Krzeski espouse (Florensky 2002, Panofsky 1991). John Berger (1972) reports on the politics of perspective, a way of seeing since the Renaissance that reflects the dominance of capitalist social relations, not only by framing the painting through the eye of the beholder: property owner, but the extent to which objects in the picture are fixed according to the logic of exchange. Sohn-Rethel (1978) has made the connection between the logic of exchange and the emergence of intellectual thought, specifically with reference to the mathematisation of society and geometry.

The individualised point of view that is a feature of perspectivism, can be attributed to the moment of exchange when the value of a commodity is realised with reference not simply to another object, but to the system of social labour as a whole. Capitalist exchange and geometry are completely abstracted from nature, as formal arrangements of time and space; and yet, because of their generalised synthesising character, are the basis for naturalised versions of the social world (Sohn-Rethel 1978).
Henri Lefebvre provides a theory of abstract space to complement Postone’s theory of abstract time, based on the same awareness of the power of abstract labour as the source of social domination and the production of geometrical capitalist urban space: streets, buildings and cities. Lefebvre captures the contingent nature of this social power: ‘abstract space is not homogeneous but has homogeneity as its goal’ (Lefebvre 1990, 287). Lefebvre invokes Picasso’s cubism as a form of anti-perspective revolutionary art, which by fracturing the continuum of time and space points to the emergence through counter projects of another kind of communist space-time (Lefebvre 1990).

**Critical Mass**

Szadkowski and Krzeski argue their chain reaction contains the possibility of dissolving the relation between theory and practice, without elaborating on this point. The chain reaction I want to reveal is not dissolving the relation between theory and practice; but, rather, to elaborate theory in a way that is practically reflexive, which means, after Gunn (1989) ‘it thinks about the validity of its own categories…within the society it attempts to understand’ (7), and, in this way, to understand ‘the totality of the social practice in which it inheres’ (7). This means ‘the idea of theory’s understanding itself as a moment in and of the practice (society) whose character and contradictions it aims to make clear’ (8). Gunn’s approach, after Marx, is not a methodology, but an immanent critique; not from a particular perspective but ‘a view from within’ the value-form and the capital relation (11).

Szadkowski and Krzeski have not fully reflected critically and practically on the concept of labour and perspective, so their chain reaction remains inert. The basis for this immanent critique is not from the perspective of labour, presented by Szadkowski and Krzeski as a disembodied concept, but through an analysis of the critical mass of capital using Marx’s theory of abstraction. Marx acknowledges the difficulties of his theory of abstraction; he ‘popularised the passages containing the substance of value and the magnitude of value as much as possible’ (Marx 1990, 89). He counsels against the idea of perspectivism, what he refers to as ‘the superficial observer’, even when observation is enhanced through the use of scientific instruments like the microscope (90). He argues instead for ‘the power of abstraction’, giving us the intellectual tools to identify the substance of the capital’s social universe, fabricated from generalised human energy: abstract labour, and materialised in the form of commodities.

Given this revolutionary understanding of critical mass it is possible to discover ways to unlock the explosive human and natural energy fixed in these real abstractions, including and in particular labour, so as to satisfy and develop real human needs and capacities in a way that sustains the natural world out of which all human and non-human life is derived (Neary 2015b). It is the critical mass substantiated by the commodity-form of value that provides the revolutionary energy to generate the continuum for a communist chain reaction.

The power of the focus on Marx’s value-form is not simply to suggest an alternative form of social epistemology, but as a radical epistemology of the social: in which the social itself is denaturalised as the manifestation of the impersonal form of social domination, generalised
as the process of capitalist exchange, whose violent nature, the imposition of commodified
time and space, is enforced by the state and its institutions, including the capitalist university.
This means not labour recovering the university with some form of proletarian science, but
new forms of social institutions grounded in the radical epistemology of the social as a new
science or field of knowledge (Neary 2020).

References

Bonefeld, Werner. 2014. *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy: On Subversion and
M. Neary

Image of the value-vortex by Sam Randall in Neary and Winn, 2017