

## **Critical Theory and the Critique of Antisemitism: On Society as Economic Object**

Werner Bonefeld<sup>1</sup>

The paper argues that the critique of modern antisemitism is fundamentally a critique of capitalist political economy. It expounds the critical tradition associated with the work of Marx, Horkheimer, Adorno and Postone, to argue that antisemitism is innate to the existent society. It explores antisemitism as a perverted form of anti-capitalism, one which associates labour economy with freedom, *Arbeit macht frei*, and rejects the manifestation of labour economy in the form of money as more money. It specifies antisemitism as a personalised critique of a crisis-ridden dynamic of real economic abstractions, of price and profit, and their regulation by the invisible hand. Modern antisemitism identifies the ghostlike character of the economic object, what Marx called the capital fetish, with the character and the power of the Jew. [Article copies available for a fee from *The Transformative Studies Institute*. E-mail address: [journal@transformativestudies.org](mailto:journal@transformativestudies.org) Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2019 by *The Transformative Studies Institute*. All rights reserved.]

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Contemporary social theory reckons that the existing society contains within itself the ‘promise of freedom’ (Honneth 2010: 10). This would suggest that it also contains within itself the ‘promise’ of a freedom from

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<sup>1</sup> **Werner Bonefeld** is a Professor of Politics at the University of York (UK). Recent publications include *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy* and *The Strong State and the Free Economy*. With Beverley Best and Chris O’Kane is co-editor of the three volume *Sage Handbook of Frankfurt School Critical Theory*. He is a member of the *critical theories of antisemitism network* <https://criticaltheoriesofantisemitism.net>. **Acknowledgements:** I am grateful to my colleague Owen Hulatt for his very helpful comments and suggestions. I am grateful also to Shane Burley for his advice and editorial efficiency, and to the two external reviewers for their helpful and insightful comments. A special thanks to Deric Shannon for waiving his anonymity.

the elements of antisemitism. Honneth's view implies that the elements of antisemitism do not really belong to society. Rather, they manifest a social pathology, which its further progress will do away with.<sup>2</sup> It is true, society ought to be free from the elements of antisemitism. Who would object to that? Yet, what really does this mean? By suggesting that antisemitism is a pathology of freedom, he does not tell us why that might be so. The critical question, why does this society express itself in antisemitic forms, is not raised. What is not raised is not recognized.

In distinction, in the critical tradition associated with the work of Karl Marx, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno and Moishe Postone, the elements of antisemitism are innate to the existent society (Fischer 2018). What is innate to society holds sway in its concept. In this tradition the critique of antisemitism amounts to a critique of capitalist society. Instead of holding within itself the promise of (a) freedom (from antisemitism), it holds within itself the elements of antisemitism. This literature can call upon two distinct classical texts. One is Horkheimer's and Adorno's (1979) 'Elements of Anti-Semitism', which appeared in their *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, the other is Postone's (1986) 'Anti-Semitism and National Socialism'. The 'Elements of Anti-Semitism' conceive of the 'rumor about Jews' (Adorno 1974: 141) as a form of paranoid rage against domination that is directly useful for the perpetuation of domination itself. It is hatred of difference, of that which is not the same and which is therefore secretly longed for but remains repressed for the sake of self-preservation within domination.<sup>3</sup> According to Eva-Maria Ziege (2009: 8), the central hypothesis of their work in the early 1940s was that although antisemitism belongs to society, society can only be understood through antisemitism. Postone approached antisemitism as a fetishized anti-capitalism, one which imagines a conflict between concrete nature (things for use, use values) and unnatural abstractness (money and the invisible

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<sup>2</sup> Honneth reformulates Kant's imperative of reason that is charged with leading humanity out of its self-imposed immaturity to maturity, by which he understands a society founded on reason. Honneth's notion that society contains within itself the promise of freedom's progress, judges its current state of affairs as a pathology – a 'pathology of individual freedom'. That is, the promise of freedom is in fact its own premise.

<sup>3</sup> On the 'Elements of Anti-Semitism', see Stoetzler's (2018a) insightful account. Stögner's (2014) account employs the prepositions of critical theory without expounding its critical acumen. She conceives of antisemitism as comparable to sexism in that it amounts to a 'critique' of perceived weakness by a cold-masculine society. There is much to be said about her approach to social 'coldness', but without further conceptualization of the social relations, its meaning remains opaque. See however Achinger's (2013) excellent account.

power of the market).<sup>4</sup> While the ‘Elements’ developed a critical social theory of antisemitism focusing on domination, Postone’s approach expounded critical insights of Marx’s critique of commodity fetishism for a critique of modern antisemitism.<sup>5</sup>

The account assembled here does not argue for one or the other critical theory approach to antisemitism. I hold that political economy is the formula of an inverted social world (2016a). Society in the inverted form of the economic object is bewitched (Bonefeld, 2016b). I argue that antisemitism is the ‘rumor about Jews’ (Adorno) as the intangible puppet master of the capitalist wealth that makes itself manifest in the form of money as more money. Antisemitism amounts to a personalized critique of a crisis-ridden dynamic of real economic abstractions, of price and profit, and their regulation by the invisible hand of the market. Modern antisemitism identifies the ghostlike character of the economic object, what Marx called the capital fetish, with the character and the power of the Jew. The argument makes use of the classic texts but refrains from excessive referencing.<sup>6</sup>

The paper is in three sections. It starts with an account of critical theory as a critique of the ghostlike character of capitalist society. This character was already identified by Adam Smith (1981) who posited that it is

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<sup>4</sup> Postone (2006) applied the notion of fetishized anti-capitalism to contemporary forms of anti-imperialism, which exonerate even the most reactionary movements, including, for example, Hamas and The Hezbollah (Butler 2013). In the UK, Butler’s view defines the approach to internationalism by the Corbyn wing of the Labor Party (Bolton and Pitts 2018). On this topic, see also Bonefeld (2005, 2014b). For a critical theory account of anti-imperialism, see Stoetzler (2018b).

<sup>5</sup> Postone’s *magnum opus*, *Time, Labor and Social Domination* (1993), does not consider antisemitism, which seems odd given that he considers antisemitism to be a fetishized anti-capitalism. Like the *Neue Marx Lektüre* that developed in West-Germany post-1968, his book is an attempt at re-interpreting Marx’s critique of political economy as a critique of Marxian economics. However, and as I have argued elsewhere (Bonefeld 2004) his reinterpretation expunges the political in political economy, which leads his account towards a system theory of social action. The one contributor to the *Neue Marx Lektüre* who examines antisemitism in the context of *Capital* is Michael Heinrich (2012). He presents Marx’s critique as a critique of the capitalist social relations and, in this context, expounds the critical meaning of Marx’s point about the capitalist individuals as personifications of economic categories. Antisemitism has to do with the personalization of capitalist social reality. For an appreciation of Postone’s critical theory, see Lange (2018) and O’Kane (2018). On the *Neue Marx Lektüre*, see Bonefeld (2014a).

<sup>6</sup> Readers familiar with these texts will spot the references and paraphrases. Those who are not might hopefully find themselves compelled to study them. Since Bonefeld (1997) my own work builds on the intersection between critical theory of antisemitism and critical theory of capitalism, developing critical theory as a critique of economic objectivity.

regulated by an invisible hand. There then follows a section about the elements of antisemitism, which, I argue, are innate to a spellbound critique of capitalist society. The final section explores the meaning of the inscription at the gate of Auschwitz, *Arbeit macht frei*, as a most logical declaration of the elements of antisemitism made manifest.

## **SOCIETY: THEORY AND PRACTICE**

For a critical theory of society, it is not the independence of the economic categories of cash and coin, money and profit, that require explanation. Rather, what needs to be explained are the social relations of production, which manifest themselves as a relationship between reified economic things. At its best, a critical theory of society thinks against the spell of the dazzling economic forms. It wants to get behind their fateful appearance as forces of economic nature. It therefore does not think about (reified) economic things. Rather, it thinks *in and through* them, at least that is its critical intension (see Adorno 1990: 25, 149). Thinking by means of definitions or identifications is quite able to say what some-thing comes under, what it illustrates, exemplifies or represents. It does not, however, say what some-thing is. Thought is required to grasp reality, which in its immediacy does not tell us what it is. What, for example, really is money and what holds sway in its concept? ‘Concepts’, Adorno says, ‘are moments of the reality that requires their formation’ (Adorno 1990: 11). Conceptualization does thus not mean ‘thinking’ *about* things. Rather, it means thinking *out of* things (33). If it were really *about* things, then conceptualization would be external to its subject matter.

Thought that does not go into its object does not recognize its object. Instead, it treats it as a theoretical hypothesis. Just as the critique of religion does not criticize God on the basis of God, a critical theory of the critique of political economy does not criticize real economic abstractions on the basis of real economic abstractions. Regarding the critique of religion, it thinks out of God to decipher 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 capitalist society 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 extramundane economic forces that prevail in and through the social individuals as personifications of a ghostlike economic objectivity. For a critical social theory, the fetishism of commodities entails the movement of some abstract, by themselves quite incomprehensible, economic forces

that assert themselves over society as if by their own volition. Yet, however objective in its nature, economic nature is in its entirety a socially constituted nature. The question of the social nature of a fateful movement of coins, which has the capacity to force a whole class of people into abject poverty without a moment's notice, is therefore one about the specific character of the capitalistically constituted social relations that assert themselves in the form of a movement of coins beyond human control. The money form disappears as a social relationship, and instead asserts an abstract economic logic, which, for a critical theory of society, manifests the vanished social subject in her own social world as a mere personification of the economic categories. The capitalist social subject is a coined subject, which on the pain of ruin, bloodshed and disaster, entails the promise of freedom as the freedom of money to beget more money.<sup>7</sup> In this freedom, the social individual is 'governed by the products of his own hand', and it is therefore his own social product that acts 'with the force of an elemental natural process' (Marx 1990: 772). Money does nothing unless it is endowed with a consciousness and a will. In Marx's argument, it is the acting individuals that bestow the economic forces with such an independent will and consciousness, one that 'takes care of both the beggar and the king' (Adorno 1990: 251). In this community of equals before money 'each pays heed to himself only, and no one worries about the rest. And precisely for that reason, either in accordance with the pre-established harmony of things, or under the auspices of an omniscient providence, they all work together to their mutual advantage, for the common weal and in the common interest' (Marx 1990: 280). Marx's ironic take on the magic of the invisible hand as the regulative principle of bourgeois freedom as economic compulsion is founded on the understanding that the social practice of the individuals manifests itself not only behind their backs but that it also prevails only in and through them.

The inversion of human practice as an action of things is well focused

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<sup>7</sup> According to Marx's critique, capitalist wealth appears in the form of an equivalent exchange relationship in which 'money...is worth more money'. This manifestation of a 'value which is greater than itself' is core to Marx's conception of capital as a social subject that has 'acquired the occult ability to add value to itself'. He asks, where does it get this quality from, and argues that 'money which begets money' entails the existence of a particular commodity, that is labor power, whose consumption creates this surplus in value (Marx 1990: 257, 255, 256). The comprehension, then, of money as the form of value, does not lie within itself. Rather, and as Adorno put it, the mysterious appearance (*Schein*) of a value equivalence between unequal values (M...M') lies in the concept of surplus value (Adorno 1962/1997: 507-508). The equivalent exchange between the traders of labor power is fundamentally one between the buyers of labor power and the producers of surplus value. On critical theory as a critique of political economy, see Bonefeld (2014a).

by Marx (1973: 239) when he writes in the money fetish that ‘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’. Social objectivity does not lead a life of its own. It is not a force of nature. Rather, it is a socially constituted objectivity – social relations vanish in their appearance as a metal or a stone, and this appearance is as real as the circumstance that the economic object imposes itself on the acting subjects as if regulated by an invisible hand. There is only one world, and that is the world of appearance. What appears in the appearance of society as a ‘stone’ or a ‘coin’ in fateful movement manifests a definite social relationship between individuals subsisting as a relationship between ‘coins’. Marx’s (1973: 832) point that ‘the monstrous objective power which social labour itself created opposite itself as one of its moments’ is key to the critique of political economy as a critical social theory. Not only does he argue that the monstrous economic power is a product of social labor. It is also beyond the control of the social individuals who appear as mere personifications of their own social world. He thus characterizes the commodity as a sensuous supersensible thing. 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 a movement of economic quantities. That is to say, the economic world contains the social individual within itself as the sensuous personification of her own reified social world.

Marx's work focuses on forms, at first on forms of consciousness (i.e., religion and law), then later on the forms of political economy. This focus ‘on forms was identical with the critique of the inverted forms of social existence, an existence constituted by the life-practice of human beings’ (Reichelt 2000: 105). That is, every social ‘form’, even the most-simple form like, for example, the commodity, ‘is already an inversion and causes the social relations to appear as relations between things’, and this appearance is real (Marx 1972: 508). The things objectify themselves in the social individuals as ‘the bearers of particular class-relations and interests’ (Marx 1990: 92). In this inverted world the individuals subsist as coined factors of production, mere human material. However, although coins tend to inflate or become depressed, they are not subjects. Yet, they impose themselves on, and also in and through, the acting subjects to the point of madness and disaster, from the socially necessary consciousness of cash and product, money and profit, to abject misery and bloodshed. Capitalist wealth appears in the form of money as more money, and the necessity of more money objectifies itself in the persons as mere ‘agents

of value' who depend for their life on the manner in which the logic of economic things unfolds.<sup>8</sup> What a monstrosity! An economic thing, this coin, that in its nature really is nothing more than a piece of metal manifests itself as a seemingly independent economic force, asserting a power by which 'the life of all men hangs by...[to the] vanishing point in the death of all' (Adorno 1990: 320). For the acting subjects, society thus appears as an uncontrollable economic subject to which they are bound by seemingly invisible threads. Indeed, the individuals carry their relationship with society, and, therewith, their access to the means of subsistence, in their pockets.<sup>9</sup>

The problem analyzed here is well focused by Helmut Reichelt. Expounding on Marx's critique of fetishism – human social relations appear as relations between things and this appearance is real – he argues that capitalist exchange relations suggest that rationally acting subjects meet freely in the marketplace to realize their rational interests, whereas in fact they act as executives of abstract social laws which they themselves have generated historically and reproduce through their rational behavior, and over which they have no control. The perception of society thus 'ensues from within the subjects who...make contracts in the sphere of circulation, where they deal in mysterious economic forms with so-called "goods", and who have always already perceived of each other as equal and free subjects of law, and who, prior to this thinly veiled perception of themselves as independent subjects, experience class society as one of inequality, exploitation and rule by an autonomized system' that feeds on the constant accumulation of the profits delivered by the consumption of labor for the sake of more profit (Reichelt 2005: 65). And then, suddenly and without warning, 'society ... finds itself put back into a state of momentary barbarism; it appears as if famine, a universal war of devastation had cut off the supply of every means of subsistence; industry and commerce seem to be destroyed; and why? Because there is too much civilization, too much means of subsistence; too much industry... And how does bourgeois society get over these crises? On the one hand by enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces; on the other, by the conquest of new markets, and by the more thorough exploitation of the old ones' (Marx and Engels 1996: 18-19). Society is thus experienced not only as a

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<sup>8</sup> Marx posits the general formula of capital as 'value in process, money in process, and, as such, capital' (1990, p. 256), and expounds value in process as a process of 'valorization', that is, the *Verwertung* of social labor. Capitalist wealth is entirely abstract or as Bellofiore (2009) put it, value is 'strictly speaking a ghost' – of a social labor 'time made abstract' (Bonefeld 2010: 262).

<sup>9</sup> On this, see Marx (1973: 156-7).

class society based on inequality, exploitation and domination. It is also experienced as a 'real economic abstraction' that moves in crisis-ridden ways, entailing 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 akin to an abstract system-logic structures the behaviors of the actual individuals by means of competing price signals and threatens their livelihood through redundancy and therewith loss of access to the means of subsistence (Adorno 1990: 311, 320, 319). That is, the logic of things 'prevails *over* mankind as something that prevails *in* them' as traders in labor power, the one buying to make a profit, the other selling to gain wage-based access to the means of subsistence (Adorno 2008: 26). In this society the products of labor that cannot be converted into money are valueless regardless of the needs that they could satisfy. What has no value in exchange has no utility and is therefore burnt. That is, however much the individual might try to raise herself above the world of the invisible hand, which does indeed regulate the relationships between the economic things, – and raise she must for the sake of maintaining the civil character of capitalist labor economy preventing cut-throat competition and thus 'bloodshed' - she remains a coined subject of price, cash, and profits. The strength of her connection to the means of life depends on the movement of the abstract economic things over which she has no control, and which impose themselves with at times devastating force, cutting society off from the means of subsistence at the blink of an eye. For the producers of surplus value, the inability to sell her redundant labor power spells disaster to the point of destitution and death. What is the price of a kidney?

The perception of the ghostlike compulsion by which capitalist society is characterized ensues not just from the fateful regulation of social reproduction by the invisible hand. It ensues also from the world market as the most developed form of capitalist society. Here it seems as if the 'limits' to 'national wealth', national industry, and national employment and wages, impose themselves upon a hard-working national people seemingly from the outside. National progress appears to be held back by external forces, which are perceived to work against the interests and integrity of a 'national community' of hard-working people. National 'disharmony' and discord seem thus to be caused by some intangible world market forces. In his critique of Carey's economic nationalist ideas, Marx argued forcefully that 'these world-market disharmonies are merely the ultimate adequate expressions of the disharmonies which have become fixed as abstract relations within the economic categories, or which have a local existence on the smallest scale' (Marx 1973: 887). In other words,

global 'disharmony' exists in and through the 'domestic relations' and vice versa. Yet it appears as if the national state, and its national economy, is effectively accountable to, and at the mercy of, a *nebuleuse* personified as the global economy.

The perception of the *nation* as a community of a people who are forced to submit to the exigencies of a global economy is entirely regressive. It lends itself to the ideology of the nation as a subject of liberation, which is as irrational as the belief in a national nature, a national homogeneity of purposes and a national destiny, from the national industry via the national interest and the national history to the national being. The idea of the nation as the foundation of being and becoming recognizes the term 'cosmopolitanism' as a term of abuse. In its stead, it puts its faith in the imagined nation as some naturally rooted and active thing, which it idolizes as the 'spirit of the people'. If indeed it is permissible at all to speak about the national spirit of the people, it is a national spirit not by nature, but by history. By reducing history to nature or by reading nature into history, the struggle for national liberation from the strictures of the world market becomes delusional inasmuch as a people are forced to act as if they really are natural forces that have a national history.<sup>10</sup>

## **ON THE ELEMENTS OF ANTISEMITISM**

I have argued that in capitalism the individuals are governed by the fateful movement of economic abstractions. The point of critique can therefore not be to 'make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains' (Marx 1990: 92).<sup>11</sup> It is therefore not sufficient to criticize capitalists for their seemingly excessive addiction to profit, nor is it sufficient to criticize bankers for pursuing money for the sake of more money. On the pain of ruin, these behaviors manifest the 'objective necessity' of the capitalistically constituted social relations.

In this context, the question 'what is criticized' becomes an important one. How does one oppose the fateful movement of coins? Who really is responsible? Clearly, the critique of the banker, or any other socio-economic operative in a system that asserts itself as an independent force over and through the social individuals, misses the object of critique. As a critical theory, the critique of political economy is not a critique of the personifications of either the economic categories or the logic that holds sway in them. Rather, it is a critique of the capitalistically organized social

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<sup>10</sup> This part draws on Adorno (2008: 100-2).

<sup>11</sup> Michael Heinrich argues with similar purpose when he expounds antisemitism as personalization of the capital fetish. See Heinrich (2012: ch. 10.2).

relations of reproduction that assume the form of a movement of economic things, which objectify themselves in the person as the human agent of her own forsaken world.

Nevertheless, while every individual is 'ruled by economic abstractions', the owners of great wealth experience this rule as a source of great enrichment and power. In this context Horkheimer and Adorno have argued that the 'rulers' are safe for as long as the 'ruled' struggle under the spell of the inverted world, in which, say, the cause of financial crisis, economic downturn, conditions of austerity and abject poverty, and competitive pressures are attributed to the greedy behavior of some known peddlers of misery (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979: 179). A spell-bound critique of capitalism demands more of this and less of that. It attributes the fateful movement of the economic forces to the individual will of the greedy money-maker, apportions blame and proclaims to know 'how to set things right'. It is founded on the rumor that capitalist economy has been corrupted by some greedy self-seekers, and that capitalism can therefore be made to work for the benefit of the national friends once the ghostlike power of the peddlers of misery has been curbed for good. This critique of capitalism does not reject capitalism. It demands a better capitalism, one that manifests the promise of the wealth of nations in opposition to the freedom of world market profits. This critique of capitalism is entirely false to the point of murder. Not only does it leave capitalist society entirely untouched by thought. It also attributes capitalist conditions to the conscious activity of some supposedly guilty party and demands action to sort things out. This personalization of the movement of economic categories entails a number of differentiations, most importantly between the productive or indeed creative capitalist as a 'producer' of 'real' wealth employing a hard-working and creative people, and the financial or indeed parasitic capitalist who makes his fortune by speculating in money to the detriment of the established system of national wealth. Here the distinction between material (national) wealth and the financial wealth of money appears in the forms of distinct personalities – pitting the creative industrialist against the parasitic banker-cum-speculator. There emerges, then, the idea of a capitalism that is corrupted by the financial interests, for the benefit of the few and to the detriment of the many. Finance stands accused for turning capitalism into a profit-making system that at the expense of national industry, national wealth, national progress, and national harmony, seeks money for the sake of more money.

In this view the capital fetish, which manifests itself in the form of money as the 'most senseless, incomprehensible form' of wealth, is not a

fetish at all (Marx 1987: 487). Rather, it presents the wealth of parasites, of some intangible external enemy within, and wealth in money accumulates as the consequence of the allegedly parasitic activity of the bankers, the financiers, and the speculators. In a society that asserts itself behind the backs of the acting subjects, the elements of antisemitism project the acting bearers (*Träger*) of the economic categories of money and finance as the hostile cosmopolitan subject that, having no roots in the industry of the nation, grows rich by speculating on the wealth created by a hard working national people. That is, a definite form of social relations manifests itself in the form of a movement of coins and then, under the spell of this coined movement, rebels against the personifications of a world governed by coins. This rebellion is entirely conformist and regressive. Instead of rejecting the trade in labor power between its buyers and the producers of surplus value, it seeks the promise of freedom from the speculators' yoke and a better market position for itself at the expense of the identified wrongdoer, the so-called merchants of greed. For the sake of the nation, something needs to be. Something can be done! The personalized critique of capitalist social relations is open to abuse from the outset. It thinks akin to a register of blame and, once radicalized to the point of maddening fury, condemns the identified party as a bloodsucker who drains the living life out of the national community of a hard-working people. It demands renewal of the nation, to make the nation strong again, in opposition to the world market society of capital, which is condemned as a network of money and power that conspires against the supposed nature of a national people who appear thus as victims of the cosmopolitan peddlers of greed and their military backers.<sup>12</sup>

The identification of the 'guilty parties' personalizes the relations of economic objectivity. It points the finger accusingly at the identified foe of the national community. Under the spell of identification, it denounces the alleged wrongdoer and once radicalized into blind resentment, becomes demagogic in its demand for retribution. Who hides behind the invisible hand of the market, what is his name, where does he live, how does he look, walk, pray? How can the invisible wrongdoer of the nation be made visible? According to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1979), the image of the Jew is ready made for this personalization.

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<sup>12</sup> The idea that so-called neoliberal capitalism resulted from a Washington-based agreement between money and power, the so-called 'Washington consensus', purports the idea, at least by implications, of a conspiratorial construction of a finance-driven world economy that, buttressed by the political and military might of the US, exploits the nations of the world for financial gain. The Washington consensus appears thus as a peddlers' construction (see, for example, Petras 2006).

Modern antisemitism feeds on the Christian antisemitism that indicts the ‘Jew’ as the assassin of Jesus and as a trafficker in money, and it thus accuses the Jew to pursue unholy unproductive activities. The image of the Jew is that of a parasite - money and finance, speculators and bankers. ‘No matter what the Jews as such may be like, their image, as that of the defeated people, has the features to which totalitarian domination must be completely hostile: happiness without power, wages without work, a home without frontiers, religion without myth. These characteristics are hated by the rulers because the ruled secretly long to possess them’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979: 185, 199). The projected Jew thus appears as a figure of undeserved liberation from sweat and toil, that is, as one that does not submit to hard work, factory organization, struggle to make ends meet, and is hated as such. Antisemitism turns the ‘longing’ for a freedom from want and for a life beyond the mere existence as human material of ‘personified labour time’ (Marx 1990: 352-3)<sup>13</sup> into a devastating rejection: it projects the Jew as the one who lives this life by exploiting the many for monetary gain. The antisemite says, our misery is the foundation of Jewish wealth. Horkheimer and Adorno (1989: 179) thus argue that the ‘rulers’ are safe for as long as the ‘ruled’ struggle under the spell of the inverted world, in which, say, the cause of financial crisis, economic downturn, and conditions of austerity are attributed to the greedy behavior of some identifiable Others. For the apologists of capitalist society, the reference to the invisible hand operates like an explanatory refuge. It explains everything with reference to the Invisible. ‘Starvation is God’s way of punishing those who have too little faith in capitalism’ (Rockefeller Sr., quoted in Marable, 1991: 149). For the antisemite, however, the power of the invisible can be explained – he sees the Jew to stand behind the invisible power of the market.

The category ‘Jew’ does not refer to a concrete person. It refers to an abstraction. For the antisemite the ‘Jew’ is the intangible and all-powerful puppet master of national misery. It is not capitalism as concrete nature that is rejected. What is rejected is the so-called Jewish capitalism, that is, financial capitalism. According to contemporary economic thinking, this capitalism is said to extract ‘financial profit directly out of the personal income of workers and others..., [which] ‘may be called financial expropriation’ (Lapavistas 2012: 16).<sup>14</sup> This argument about financial

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<sup>13</sup> As Marx’s (1976: 127) observed, if ‘time is everything, [then] man is nothing; he is, at the most, time’s carcass’.

<sup>14</sup> Harvey (2004) conceives of financial expropriation as a resumption of primitive accumulation, which he calls accumulation by dispossession.

capitalism denies that capitalism is in fact a monetary system.<sup>15</sup> The point here is neither to reject nor to taint the argument about financial capitalism.<sup>16</sup> The point is rather that its incomprehension of money as the form of value opens the pandoras' box, in which the elements of antisemitism lie in wait. Hardened by the cold stare of the elements of antisemitism, it posits the financialization of capitalism as a suckers' paradise, one in which the promise of opulence for the many brought about by a well-functioning national labor economy is crushed by a few cosmopolitan peddlers of misery. What makes money Jewish, what is a Jewish capitalism, and what is the concrete nature of a (capitalist) labor economy? For the antisemite, this radicalized subject of conformist rebellion, financial capitalism amounts to a Jewish conspiracy. He demands jobs and conditions for a people of an imagined national nature, defined by the camaraderie of soil and blood, and seeks the imaginary power and the money wealth of the projected foe for himself. Antisemitism articulates a senseless and barbaric discontent with conditions. Its rebellion for concrete nature eliminates even the glimpse of a life beyond 'domination'. Because its anti-capitalism leaves capitalism entirely untouched, it is totalitarian in character as it 'it seeks to make the rebellion of suppressed nature against domination directly useful to domination' to the point of utter destruction (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979: 195). Auschwitz is this destruction. For Adorno, it confirmed the bourgeois relations of pure identity as death. It identified Man as a metaphysical distraction to the business at hand. What counts is what can be numbered and subsists as such in a numbered manner – mere material. Every number is a resource, and if it is not, it is not worth anything at all. What cannot be used (anymore) is gassed and burnt. There is no time to waste.

### *Arbeit macht frei*

It is important to distinguish between the elements of antisemitism and antisemitism. Fundamentally, antisemitism 'is the rumor about Jews' (Adorno 1974: 141). The rumored Jew has no concrete existence. The Jew

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<sup>15</sup> The insight that capitalism is a monetary system is of crucial significance to the *Neue Marx Lektüre*, see Backhaus (1975). See also Arthur (2004), Lotz (2014), Heinrich (2017), and Smith (2005).

<sup>16</sup> It is however the case that contemporary populism proclaims against financial globalization ostensibly in order either to make the nation great again or to make the economy work for the many. The difference between these proclamations is most important, and so is the logic that holds sway in the overlap. See Bonefeld (2019).

exists as an abstract and appears as an invisible, entirely intangible and cunning foe who is difficult to pin down. The elements of antisemitism reject the hated forms of capitalism and attribute them to the hidden nature of the intangible Jew, who like the invisible is everywhere and meddles in everything. The elements of antisemitism are innate to the conspiracy theory of capitalist development. According to the rumor, the cunning Jew stands behind phenomena, and who stands behind the phenomena is the hidden and invisible puppet-master of the world. Antisemitism is first of all an attempt at unmasking the Jew be it by desecrating the soil of her final resting place or by attaching a star to her clothes and place of business. It is an attempt at unmasking the grinning speculator behind the human façade. It does not matter who the concrete individual is. What matters is visibility, and what is made visible is marked out for ridicule, arson, and destruction, akin to a fallen star that has come to down earth. What has fallen can be kicked with joyless abandonment and cheerful relentlessness. The elements of antisemitism do not entail the pogrom as its automatic destiny. They prepare the ground, point the finger, spread the rumor, and establish the legitimation for this perverted rebellion against capitalism. Ulrike Meinhof, the late co-founder of the German Red Army Faction, articulated succinctly the rationalization of antisemitism as a hatred of capitalism when she said that ‘Auschwitz meant that six million Jews were killed, and thrown on the waste-heap of Europe, for what they were: money Jews. Finance capital and the banks, the hard core of the system of imperialism and capitalism, had turned the hatred of men against money and exploitation, and against the Jews...Anti-Semitism is really a hatred of capitalism’ (Meinhof, quoted Watson, 1976: 23). When antisemites attack capitalism, what is the measure of success?<sup>17</sup>

The previous section argued that according to the antisemites the world is divided between hated forms of capitalism, especially finance and money capital, and concrete nature. The concrete is conceived as immediate, direct, matter for use, and rooted in industry and productive activity. Money, on the other hand, is not only conceived of as the root of all evil, it is also judged as rootless and as existing not only independently from industrial capital but, also, over and against it: for the sake of money as more money erodes the foundation of the nation, its soil and its blood. In this way, money and financial capital are identified with capitalism while industry and productive labor is perceived as constituting the concrete and creative being of a national people. Thus, industry and enterprise are ‘made’ capitalist by (Jewish) money: money penetrates all

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<sup>17</sup> On the question of success, see the contributions to Stoetzler (2014).

expressions of industry and thus perverts and disintegrates the community of the people in the name of finance capital's destructive quest for self-expansion. The force and power of money is seen to undermine the individual as entrepreneur; the creative in terms of national industry; the rooted in terms of the imagined traditions of blood and soil; the community in terms of a paternalist direction of use-value production. For the antisemites, then, it is possible not only to embrace capitalism but, also, to declare that labor creates freedom.

The approval of the *Volksgenosse* as the personification of concrete nature, blood, soil, and industry goes hand in hand with the denunciation of the Jew as the personalized power of economic abstractions. In this manner, the ideology of blood and soil, on the one hand, and machinery and unfettered industrial expansion, on the other, are projected as images of a healthy nation that stands ready to purge itself from the perceived enemies of the national economy, that is, the abstract, universal, rootless, mobile, intangible, international 'vampire' of 'Jewish capitalism'. Extermination is itself an effort of concrete nature, and thus industrialized. As *Volksgenossen* they have all committed the same deed and have thus become truly equal to each other: their efficiently discharged occupation only confirmed what they already knew, they had lost their individuality and had instead been set loose as a hard-working subject of extermination. Antisemitism is the national fury that is set loose as the subject of maddened liberation from the identified foe. Its furious affirmation of its own maddening reality is 'the substitute for the dream that humanity could organize its world humanely, a dream that a man-made world is stubbornly rejecting' (Adorno 1986: 182). Indeed, Auschwitz confirmed the 'stubbornness' of the principle of 'abstraction' not only through extermination for extermination's sake but also, and because of it, through 'abstractification'. The abstract concept Jew was made into a numbered cipher and it was then *made* abstract: all that can be used is used like teeth, hair, skin; labor-power; and, finally, what remained was made abstract and thus invisible. The identified puppet master was transformed into smoked-filled air.

Everything is thus changed into pure nature. The economic abstraction was not only personalized, it was also 'abstractified'. At the gate of Auschwitz, the *Volksgenossen* made clear that money does not liberate anybody from concrete nature; in fact, it pronounced with deadly intent that the labor of Auschwitz is to liberate the concrete from the abstract to the vanishing point of death. Not money but labor makes you free – *Arbeit macht frei* – until the laboring ceases. Labor liberates. Normality is death. Industry is the bond of soil and blood. Extermination is efficiently

discharged. It manifests ‘the stubbornness of the life to which one has to conform, and to resign oneself’ (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979: 171).

Upon arrival at the factory of death, everybody was assessed for use. Those deemed unable to work were discarded without second thought. Those deemed able to work were worked until liberated from life, until death. Auschwitz was a factory ‘to destroy the personification of the abstract. Its organization was that of a fiendish industrial process, the aim of which was to “liberate” the concrete from the abstract. The first step was to dehumanize, that is, to strip away the “mask” of humanity, of qualitative specificity, and reveal the Jews for what “they really are” – shadows, ciphers, numbered abstraction’, mere disposable human material. Then followed the process to ‘eradicate that abstractness, to transform it into smoke, trying in the process to wrest away the last remnants of the concrete material “use-values”: clothes, gold, hair, soap’ (Postone 1986: 313-314). Adorno and Horkheimer’s point that ‘Anti-Semitic behavior is generated in situations where blinded men robbed of their subjectivity are set loose as subjects’ describes the behavior of a mob (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979: 171). It does not capture the labor of Auschwitz. Nobody was set loose. Everybody worked in a disciplined manner until the end with relentless dedication to achieve the task at hand. *Arbeit macht frei* addresses the rumor about the easy living Jews with industrialized intent. It says, Jews are put to work here until they are no more and that is our labor of liberation.

## CONCLUSION

Capitalist society does not contain within itself the promise of freedom as the secret essence of its future being. It contains within itself the promise of its own falseness. It is not the intension of a critical theory of society to tease the promise of freedom out of society. It does not judge society on the basis of its normative ideal. Its critical intension is to reveal its conceptuality. It wants to know its social nature to understand what it is capable of, and why.

There is, says Adorno (1962: 30), a need for a ‘practice that fights barbarism’, and yet, he argues rightly, there can be no such practice. Barbarism cannot be fought in a direct and immediate manner - what really does it mean to struggle against money, resist the movement of coins, combat the movement of interest rates, fight price movements, and resist poverty in a mode of social reproduction, which entails the ‘pauper’ in its conception of wealth (Marx 1973: 604). A ‘practice that fights barbarism’ is about the social relations that manifest themselves in the logic of

seemingly self-moving economic forces. Clearly, it is impossible to hold coins responsible for their movement. I have argued that the personalized critique of the movement of coins contains the elements of antisemitism. Personalization entails attribution. It attributes the fateful movements of the economic forces to the identifiable image of the national foe and demands retribution. The elements of antisemitism attribute blame and thus personalize the critique of the false society to the point of blind fury. The rumor about the Jew provides an outlet for anger and hatred, and a target, which can be attacked at will.

The rumor about the Jews comprehends nothing. It is therefore all-pervasive and all-embracing. The Jew is said to stand behind the fateful economic phenomena and is thus condemned as a conspiring parasite. This condemnation is totalitarian in character in that it identifies the fateful dynamic of the economic forces with the character of the Jews, and what is identified as Jewish in character is secretly longed for. Innate to (the elements of) antisemitism is the aspiration to live the life of the condemned Jew. The antisemite speculates in death and banks the extracts gold teeth.

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