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Summary: A review of *The Philosophical Roots of Anti-Capitalism: Essays on History, Culture, and Dialectical Thought* by David Black, (Lexington Books, 2013). Originally appeared in the blog *Criticism &c.* <http://criticismetc.wordpress.com/2014/04/06/roots/> - Editors

Tracing the Contours of Anti-Capitalism

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Capitalism in the U.S. and Europe has evidently survived the massive financial crisis it found itself confronted by in late 2007. What's more, at least in the U.S., capitalism was neither seriously threatened with mass political or social opposition from within during the crisis, nor was it sufficiently frightened by the scale of the threat into instituting anything more than mild internal reforms. It seems that everything continues much as it did before.

A system that perpetuates itself in large part by discouraging any penetrating questions about its long-term viability can be expected to avoid any self-reflection. For those who consider themselves critics of the capitalist system however, the question cannot be avoided: what does this mean for us? After all, an international economic catastrophe doesn't fall into one's lap every day. To put it bluntly, can the subjective outcome of the next inevitable crisis be expected to be any different?

While it is true that "anti-capitalism" is a term of currency in the diffuse international network that survives since the demise of the anti-globalization and Occupy Wall Street movements, the concept is so ill-defined that Naomi Klein, Marine Le Pen, and Pope Francis can all be described as representing "anti-capitalist" currents of contemporary politics. Even representatives of the Marxist left fail to provide any theoretical clarity, as demonstrated by Kshama Sawant, a socialist with links to Trotskyism who was recently elected to the Seattle city council. She was quoted in a profile in *The New York Times* saying, "If you ask me as a socialist what workers deserve, they deserve the value of what they produce," thereby revising Marx's position on the crucial question regarding the dispensation of the total social product of the laborers since at least the publication of *The Poverty of Philosophy* in 1847.

Swimming against this anti-theoretical stream, Marxist-Humanist Dave Black has made a serious contribution to our apprehension of capitalism as more than a system that results in income inequality. *The Philosophical Roots of Anti-Capitalism: Essays on History, Culture, and Dialectical Thought* takes readers on a journey back to the emergence of Western philosophy itself to grasp the totality of the problem that was referred to in the nineteenth century as the "Social Question."

In the first of two major essays in his collection, Black takes up the neglected German Marxist thinker Alfred Sohn-Rethel, an emigre from Nazi Germany who, while hailing from the same social and intellectual milieu as the great men of Critical Theory, was never permitted into the magic circle of the Institute for Social Research. Adorno, in this case, apparently felt that Sohn-Rethel's arguments fell outside of Marxism as Critical Theory (which had no qualms about departing from Marx's thought as it saw necessary) defined it.

Sohn-Rethel sought to discover the origin of the alienation that defines life under capitalist relations in the abstraction inherent in the process of commodity exchange. In his book *Intellectual and Manual Labor: A Critique of Epistemology* (originally published in German in 1970 and translated into English in 1978; long since out of print) Sohn-Rethel links the abstraction of Greek philosophy to that necessary for money to play its role in the exchange of commodity from buyer to seller. Interestingly, Marx himself mentions the Greek intellectual experience at the point of his first use of the word fetishism, in the section on "Needs, Production, and the Division of Labor" in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (Lawrence Krader tells us that Marx appropriates the word from the eighteenth-century French explorer and ethnologist Charles de Brosses, author of *The Cult of the Fetish Gods*).

This thesis, while dealing with some of the most fundamental elements of Marx's philosophical critique of capitalism, diverges profoundly from Marx in that Sohn-Rethel rejects labor—bifurcated into abstract and concrete forms—in favor of exchange as the ultimate source of capitalist alienation. This split in the category of labor, as Black reminds us, is what Marx called "the pivot" necessary to understanding his critique. Crucially, the split occurred historically not with the first appearance of money and exchange, but with definitive domination of production based on labor-power as a commodity over prior forms such as slavery and feudalism. Commodity production is not timeless, but historically rooted in this development.

Sohn-Rethel further departs from the Hegelian-Marxist philosophical tradition in a preference for Kant over Hegel (a reoccurring trope with those seeking to revise Marx within boundaries of Marxism), describing the latter as imbued with the timeless abstract concepts linking money and the commodity.

Black delivers a substantive and wide-ranging critique of Sohn-Rethel's argument by, in part citing I.I. Rubin and Raya Dunayevskaya (placing the latter squarely in the company of the theorists of value-theory critique), to point to the inextricability within the commodity of value and use-value, abstract labor and concrete labor. Overcoming the alienation of capitalism starts with eliminating the conditions out of which the form of the commodity arises—production based on the separation of abstract and concrete labor. Drawing on Moishe Postone (a mention of him later), Black makes this point by writing, "To restrict the value-form to the abstraction in exchange is to ignore abstract labor as forming the basis for alienated social structures."

While Sohn-Rethel may be largely unfamiliar to an American audience, the subject of Black's second major essay is close to the heart of contemporary radical thinking. Interest in Guy Debord, critic of capitalist society and one of the founders of the Situationist International, surged during the Occupy Wall Street movement as some of its activists attempted to find historic precedents for anti-authoritarian forms of organization coupled with radical critiques of today's economic and

cultural landscape. Indeed, the content of Debord's work, with its emphases on artistic expression and the ramifications of the media-advertising-entertainment complex, ensures that his relevance will extend well into the foreseeable future.

What characterizes Black's essay is his effort to remove Debord from the art and media curriculums in which academic critics are quite comfortable in appreciating him and place him instead in the historic current of Hegelian-Marxism. Black is here well within a vital minority trend in Debord scholarship, which includes T.J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith and the radical theorist Anselm Jappe. Black distinguishes himself from this group, however, with a perspective critical of their shared attempt to assimilate Debord into the influential thought of Moishe Postone, who stands Marx on his head by positing Capital as the real philosophical and historical Subject in place of the proletariat.

Along with this and an interesting recovery of Surrealism as an authentic participant in the Hegelian-Marxism tradition, Black contributes at least one other important new element to an understanding of Debord. While the relationship of Debord and Cornelius Castoriadis's *Socialisme ou Barbarie* is widely known, Black treats the Situationist International in the context of the mid-1950s trans-Atlantic debate on revolutionary organization and working-class consciousness among non-Trotskyist Marxist groups. Black clarifies the positions of Castoriadis, Raya Dunayevskaya, C.L.R. James, and council communist Anton Pannekoek, still a participant in the socialist movement after being in the thick of organizational debates well before the self-immolation of the Second International in 1914. Pannekoek contributed an important letter on organization to *Socialisme ou Barbarie* in 1954 which prompted an international debate and was still cited as relevant by Dunayevskaya as late as 1987, although she was sharply critical of his attitude to philosophy (the scientist Pannekoek was by no means a Hegelian).

While Debord was filled with enthusiasm for the concrete possibilities of the May 1968 revolt in France, in which he and the Situationist International played a role that is hard to exaggerate, he had moved by the Reagan-Thatcher era to a position of extreme skepticism toward the chances of a real rupture of the capitalist domination of popular consciousness he called in 1967 the Spectacle. Ironically, Debord's darkly pessimistic theses on conspiracy, state surveillance, and invasive media (and this before the debut of the internet) published in 1988 as *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, may make him more attractive to young radicals today than the "new absolute of council communism" (Black's phrase) on the cusp of becoming reality in 1968. In a world in which capitalism achieves preternaturally immense levels of production with an increasingly small direct participation of the human being, it may seem to some that Situationist detournement, bowdlerized as "culture jamming" is the sole remaining field of revolt left to us.

Black's new book is welcome because in his discussions of Sohn-Rethel and Debord, he grounds "anti-capitalism" in concepts that it cannot be separated from if it is to achieve an actual transcendence of the object of its critique: among them, production and exchange, abstract and concrete labor, the commodity, and class consciousness. The engagement with the humanist and Hegelian Marx that serves as the foundation of these essays is sorely needed in the epoch of capitalist triumphalism in which, despite the recent apocalyptic economic crisis, we still seem to be mired.