

What (if Anything) Is Wrong with Capitalism? Three Paths of the Critique of Capitalism

Introduction

The Recent Boom [Konjunktur] in the Critique of Capitalism

The **critique of capitalism is booming** [*hat Konjunktur*]. Stamped [*geprägt*] with the mood of the times, this critique may be diffuse, sometimes insufficiently complex, and in some respects even disconcertingly **inflationary**.¹ Nevertheless, there are good grounds for this boom or, in any case, an understandable source.

But what is really the problem with capitalism? Is it wrong, unjust, irrational, or bad? Is it evil or dumb—or is it just not working? To ask another way: On what basis is capitalism subject to criticism?

In this article, I do not provide in response to this question any new information, nor can I offer a new empirical diagnosis of the current position of the world economy or even constructive suggestions to alleviate the crisis. What I would much more like to do is the following: I will examine and thereupon interrogate, from a methodological point of view, *three paths of the critique of capitalism*—*how* they proceed, and which possibilities they adhere to for **a critique of capitalism as a specific way of economic and social organization**. (I concern myself thus above all with the methodological question of which figures of argumentation [*Argumentationsfiguren*] are in play and how promising these are.)

The question, “What (if anything) is wrong with capitalism?” is thereby not meant cynically. I don’t want to leave open whether there is currently *something* problematic about the global economic system and the constitution of our societies. But it appears far less self-evident to me *which of the many maladies in the world can be traced back in a specific way to capitalism*, and whether there is, as Philippe van Parijs asked, in fact something *intrinsically wrong* with capitalism.

¹ Von Zeitstimmungen geprägt mag diese Kritik diffus, manchmal unterkomplex und in einiger Hinsicht sogar befremdlich inflationär sein.

Is there thus something that is not just a side-effect of some chance peculiarity of capitalism, but which occurs *systematically in conjunction with it (and only with it)*—and **that is moreover (fundamentally) problematic**? The object of our critique—if it is to be a critique of capitalism—can surely neither be something that occurs *in all conceivable forms* of society; nor can the critique, if it is to be a critique of capitalism, pertain to something that occurs *only incidentally* in connection with it. In other words, if something in the social systems under consideration is supposed to be wrong or problematic—**is it in fact capitalism that is to carry the blame?** (or perhaps modernity? or even the *conditio humana* in general?)

This question seems to me to be not to be trivial, since now much critical attention is again being brought to bear on capitalism (which is not self-evident). After all, we should like to know *what exactly we are criticizing* when we take view of what is perhaps an unjust world economic order. And it could prove still more vital for the known strategies of “limitation” or “domestication” of capitalism, **the economic system cannot be treated like a black box**, but rather more precisely to ask, whether there is something in the constitution and dynamics of this system, which that is antagonistic to its own limitation or its democratic “framing” in justice-oriented adjusting institutions.² (By *black box approach* I mean the tendency to talk only about how one would *distribute* the wealth that is produced within an economic system, but not about how it is *produced* and *what kind* of wealth is supposed to be produced.)

What Is Capitalism?

Here the term “capitalism,” by way of a merely brief and thetic [*thetisch*] preliminary, shall in the context of my reflections designate a social *and* economic system, so encompassing the whole of economic, social, cultural, and political dimensions that mark the way of life in capitalistically constituted societies.

“Capitalism” is thence, in the context of interest here, the designation of an economic and societal order that developed historically in Europe as it broke with the feudal order at the end of the Middle Ages, and which, in the 18th and 19th centuries, became dominant worldwide as industrial capitalism via high technological sophistication connected with a substantial concentration of capital.³ In systematic respect, the following aspects can be

² Und es könnte sich noch für die bekannten Strategien der "Begrenzung" oder "Domestizierung" des Kapitalismus als entscheidend herausstellen, das ökonomische System nicht lediglich wie eine *black box* zu behandeln, sondern genauer zu fragen, ob es in der Verfasstheit und Dynamik dieses Systems etwas gibt, das sich einer Begrenzung oder seiner demokratischen "Einrahmung" in gerechtigkeitsorientierte ausgleichende Institutionen entgegenstellt.

³ "Kapitalismus" ist also in dem hier interessierenden Zusammenhang die Bezeichnung für eine Wirtschafts- und Gesellschaftsordnung, die sich die sich historisch in Europa im Ausgang des Mittelalters mit der Ablösung der feudalen Ordnung entwickelt hat und im 18./19. Jahrhundert auf hohem technologischen Niveau und verbunden mit einer erheblichen Konzentration von Kapital als Industriekapitalismus weltweit dominant geworden ist.

shown to be characteristic [*charakteristisch*] of the capitalist mode of production and of societies characterized [*geprägten*] by capitalism: (1) private ownership of the means of production and a distinction between producers and means of production, (2) the existence of a free labor market, and (3) the accumulation of capital and, as a consequence, an orientation toward the exploitation of capital, thus toward gain instead of need, toward the cultivation of capital instead of the consumption of it or subsistence on it. (4) Typically the market functions in a capitalist society as a coordinating mechanism for the allocation as well as the distribution [*Distribution*] of goods (thus the distribution [*Verteilung*] of resources such as labor, capital, land, and raw materials with regard to their various possible uses toward the production of goods, on the one hand, and the distribution [*Verteilung*] of the latter to individual consumers, on the other hand), such that capitalism and the market economy are closely bound to one another, though not identical to each other.

Three Dimensions of Critique

What then is the problem with capitalism? If we at once leave aside trivial indictments against personal greed, let us distinguish three models of argumentation and three respective strategies of critique.

First, a *functional* argumentative strategy: Capitalism cannot function as a social and economic system; it is intrinsically dysfunctional and necessarily crisis-prone.

Second, a *moral* or justice-oriented mode of argument: Capitalism is based on *exploitation*; it withholds from people, in an unfair and unjust way, the fruits of their own labor, and it entraps them in servitude of a system that uses a variety of ways to cheat them of what they are due. Briefly (and less dramatically) put: Capitalism is either based on an *unjust* social structure or it produces one.

Third, the *ethical* critique: That a life shaped [*geprägte*] by capitalism is a bad (e.g. an alienated) life. It is impoverished, without meaning, or empty, and destroys essential components of that which belongs to a fulfilled, happy, but above all “truly free” human life.

These three strategies of argumentation, all of which can already be found at the outset of capitalism and the critique of capitalism, have had very distinct flourishings [*Konjuncturen*]. Now let us ask for each of these lines of argumentation, **whether it is convincing** with respect to whether it can accomplish something for a renewal of the critique of capitalism under present-day conditions, at the same time raising the question, **whether and how the relevant aspects [*Aspekte*] of capitalism connect with their respective dimensions of**

critique. My conjecture is that the *interrelation* between the dimensions [*Dimensionen*] of capitalism I distinguish here and their respective possible critiques **is instructive**, such that the aspects [*Aspekte*] I distinguish here are potentially just suited in their connection to substantiate a critique of capitalism *as* capitalism.⁴ Mind you, I will follow up on this conjecture only in the last part of this essay. First I would like to now explain somewhat more precisely the three strategies of argumentation I have distinguished and thereby to try to highlight their productive moments as well as their limitations.

1. The Theorem of Functional Deficiency

I will begin with **the functional critique**. The “functional” strategy of argumentation ran: Capitalism does not *function* as a social and economic system. It is intrinsically dysfunctional and necessarily crisis-prone.

The theoretically simplest (though empirically the easiest raise doubts about) version of such a critique is the simple crisis-theorem of pauperization theory. Capitalism, so diagnosed almost since it began, will not produce in the long run what can sustain the subsistence of individuals involved by means of economic processes of concentration and rationalization. Consequences of capitalist economic development will be thus the permanent and aggravated pauperization of ever-larger masses of the population, leading eventually to the breakdown of the system. More complex is the theory of systematic distribution [*Absatz*] and production crises. And at the most sophisticated is surely the Marxist theorem of tendential fall of the rate of profit, which causes the capitalist dynamic to virtually undermine itself through changes in the so-called “organizational configuration of capital” (thus to the relation of living labor and machinery). However, arguments about functional deficiency can also be found outside of this implied theoretical framework. So it could also be argued, for example, that the “invisible hand” of the ideal market is not in the position to guarantee the production of *public goods*, which also relies on it. And perhaps it is not unimportant to stress at this point that the “functional critique” of capitalism does not limit itself to economic crisis scenarios. In addition, the thesis can be argued that capitalism possesses a functional deficit in the sense held, e.g., by Daniel Bell (but also Joseph Schumpeter): by way of example, that capitalism, for its enculturation [*Ausbildung*] and conservation, systematically undermines necessary psychic and cognitive dispositions.

⁴ Meine Vermutung ist, dass gerade die *Verflechtung* zwischen den von mir hier unterschiedenen Dimensionen des Kapitalismus bzw. der möglichen Kritik an diesem instruktiv ist, so dass die von mir hier unterschiedenen Aspekte möglicherweise gerade in ihrem Zusammenhang dazu geeignet sind, eine Kritik am Kapitalismus *als* Kapitalismus zu untermauern.

Now, such a functional strategy of argumentation—as a strategy of argumentation—has noticeable advantages. It is among other reasons attractive since as a frame of critique it appears to be able to proceed without *needing standards of justification*. Not only is it something that is not functioning, even manifestly ineffectual. Something is non-functional, if it undermines its own capacity to function on the basis of the grounds it lays *for itself*—it refutes itself entirely and patently. And still better: such a non-functioning provides grounds to the proposition that the problem in the long run will dispose of itself, will finish itself off.

To be sure, we can hold much of the above addressed theorems to be refuted and have done so in many instances, even if the current financial and economic crisis gives cause to the question, whether the claim in fact proves sound that capitalism “still rises successfully from every crisis.” However, I do not want to concern myself content-wise with the refutation of crisis scenarios. Instead, I want to illuminate somewhat more precisely the structure itself of such a functional mode of argumentation, in order to point out the (already laid out) deficiencies in such argumentation.

Structure of Functional Deficiencies

What then is a functional deficiency? That something is functionally deficient means that it is not so functioning as it is supposed to be functioning, i.e., it does not function as promised or in accordance with its prescribed task. The task of a knife is to cut. A blunt knife is not functioning to the extent that it is not cutting.

The imputation of a *systematic* functional deficit thus arises out of the mere factual circumstance [*Umstand*] that something is not functioning as it should, by claiming that it is not *able* to do so on systemic grounds. It is not just that the deficiency emerges regularly or repeatedly. Something that is *systematically* failing to function, thus does not do so because it lacks the requirements for it to function as expected. A knife that doesn't even have a blade or whose blade is deformed is wrongly constructed for its purported task. It lacks an important condition for it to function as a knife (i.e., for cutting). In this simple sense it constitutes a systematic non-functionality—not merely a chance or empirically contingent one.

The stronger (and one could say, “dialectical”) formulation for such a systematic non-functionality is however composed somewhat differently. We can describe this theorem as a case where the non-functionality is internal to [*dazu gehört*] the function of an object. Or rather: the non-functionality is the other side of functionality. Something functions then in a way that at the same time undermines this functionality—that is, it thwarts the basis of its particular functionality. Now this rings somewhat cloudy and paradoxical; but it does, I

would claim, approximate the sense had by Marxist analysis, insofar as it addresses itself to capitalism as a dysfunctional system of social and economic organization. Of course, this (“dialectical”) understanding of non-functionality has its vagaries.

Problematic of the Functional Critique

One sees the problematic character of such a functional critique, that is, if we make the following clear. Firstly, it is not strictly speaking, that the described object—i.e. the described system—that appears to undermine its own functionality in the course of its functioning, is functional *in the same respect* [*Hinsicht*] that it is non-functional. This impression develops only since here various respects [*Hinsichten*] are shoved together that may be distinct. So we could say (in the case of the capitalist economic system), that here something—*now*—functions such that in the long run—thus, in the *future*—it will no longer function. (The overexploitation of natural resources would be an example of this. It enables us *now* to maintain a certain level of prosperity, but in the meantime it may threaten *future* conditions for human life.) But we could alternatively say, that something functions from *one particular* perspective [*Hinsicht*] while hindering it *from other* perspectives [*Hinsichten*]. So it may be somewhat difficult to dispute that there exists both poverty and prosperity in societies organized by capitalism; the dynamic economic development connected with capitalist modernization has indeed created outrageous amounts of wealth, but this prosperity has not come to benefit everybody in equal measure.

But if we differentiate among such perspectives [*Hinsichten*] in the way so described, it indicates that the thesis of the systematic dysfunctionality and “self-undermining” of the capitalist social and economic system is not as easy to pose as it appears.

You see, it is in reference to functionality that we in fact “telescope” into differentiated perspectives [*Hinsichten*]; so it may be claimed, that the functional deficit (of capitalism) in question only subsists because we demand from it the solution to problems that are not necessarily related to each other. (One such problem might be the demand for not only dynamic economic growth and productivity [*Wirtschaftsleistung*] but also the equal distribution of its results; or the assumption that capitalism is to provide not only for the present but also for the future; and so on.) Mind you, it is not my intention to cast doubt on the position that it may be desirable to live in a society that accords with all these requirements. I want to register doubt only as to whether we can or should pursue this wish within the parameters of this mode of functional critique here under examination.

The crucial result of my reflections up to this point is the following: The functional critique as represented here produces valid perspectives [*Hinsichten*], which we can hold as

crucial, it conflates such perspectives [*Hinsichten*] while also taking on inevitably *teleological* [*Zielbestimmungen*] and value-laden judgments.⁵ Now, this ties in with a general point that concerns the discussion of functionality as a whole: Functionality does something always only *in relation* to something—in relation that is to a defined function. The knife also functions (or doesn't function) *in relation* to cutting. We attribute this function to the knife virtually without question. To what else besides cutting is a knife good for? Now, with capitalism, it is less clear what its function should be. And quite generally, “function” and “functionality” are not uncontested givens—not already “integrated” somewhere—in relation to social facticity [*soziale Gegebenheiten*]. In other words, functions in relation to social facticity [*soziale Gegebenheiten*] are not immediately inherent or given without interpretation.

All the same, if the apparent deficits of an object are always in relation to functions that are assigned to an object, and if it is not possible at minimum to derive the function of specified “objects” directly out of their “suchness” [*“Sosein”*], then the criterion of non-functionality must rely on other criteria (even if only the *assignment* of functions).

Normative Character [geprägtes] of Non-Functionality

The **criterion of functionality** and non-functionality is thus **not “freestanding.”** Then the undermining of future conditions of human life is a functional deficit only if we also attribute to the present economy the task of facilitating future life (instead of saying, “The Devil takes the hindmost” [*“Den Letzten beißen die Hunde”*⁶]). And in general: not only does capitalism not so easily collapse into itself.⁷ It also does not *so easily* fail to function. To the extent that it does not function, it fails to function from the point of view [*hinsichtlich*] of particular goals and associated value-judgments or norms. We are the ones who base our analyses on these value-judgments and norms. We can thus only uphold the evidence of a functional deficit, if we interpret the non-functionality as an always already *normatively stamped* [*geprägtes*] *non-functionality*. You see, even if poverty-production and prosperity-production in capitalism necessarily belong together, still no long-running “contradiction” would arise from it that automatically correlates with a dysfunctionality of the system. The simultaneity of poverty and prosperity becomes a contradiction only under specific conditions and dysfunctional only when the position evoked with it is also thoroughly

⁵ Das entscheidende Resultat meiner bisherigen Überlegungen ist ja folgendes: Die hier vorgestellte funktionale Kritik macht *Hinsichten* geltend, die man für entscheidend hält, sie fügt solche *Hinsichten* zusammen und nimmt dabei unumgänglich auch *Zielbestimmungen* und Wertentscheidungen vor.

⁶ Lit., “The last are bitten by the dogs.”

⁷ Und allgemeiner: Der Kapitalismus bricht nicht nur nicht einfach so in sich zusammen.

practical, if it is also interpreted as a scandal in a normatively charged [*vorgeprägt*] way.⁸ Insofar as the reaction of affected parties is also a part of the non-functionality of a social system, this normative component is indeed evident: The “rabble” produced by the dynamics of the bourgeois economy and threatening societal integration is—as in Hegel’s famous analysis of the “oppressive problem of poverty in civil society”—not simply impoverished, it is *outraged*. And it is this outrage and its consequences that are in the position to threaten the cohesion of society.

There may be definitive limits to functional capacity somewhere. But in a certain sense “functioning” is still taking place (as we can study at a widespread development) in societies, in which the upper and even middle strata can only feel secure in “gated communities” or—reversely—in which a not insignificant part of the population spends its life behind bars, in either of which case the poor are locked in or locked out. Whether we find **that a society is not functioning as a society depends precisely upon our finding it not functioning well, that is, it is not functioning in the way that it should.** We consider particular kinds of functionalities to be *wrong*—for example, an economic dynamic at the expense future or at the expense of the excluded. A society behind bars fails to correspond to our idea of what society is or should be. That **functional crises** (of capitalism) are always already at the same time **also normative crises** then means, that if capitalism as social and economic system threatens to fail—a position that some again today appear to envisage—this failure stands always in connection with the consideration [*Umstand*] that we *thus do not want to live* in this particular way. (And not simply: that we *cannot* live so.)

Assessment of the Model of Functional Critique

Some of the evidence that appears to make the functional critique such a good candidate for the critique of capitalism is thus, following from my above discussion, in certain respects *dubious*. If the appeal of the functional thesis pertains therefore to the belief in being able to manage without a normative background—if something does not function, its non-functioning appears a corruption without further explanation—then it must now be represent itself on its own terms as being *dependent on a normative background* (thus in relation to positions about how something *is supposed to* function).⁹

⁸ Zu einem Widerspruch wird die Gleichzeitigkeit von Armut und Reichtum nur unter bestimmten Bedingungen und dysfunktional wird die damit evozierte Lage auch ganz praktisch nur dann, wenn sie—normativ vorgeprägt—auch als Skandal verstanden wird.

⁹ Bezieht die funktionale These ihre Attraktivität daher, dass sie glaubt, ohne normativen Hintergrund auskommen zu können—wenn etwas nicht funktioniert, funktioniert es nicht und das scheint auch ohne weitere Begründung schlecht—so stellt sie sich jetzt als ihrerseits *abhängig von einem normativen Hintergrund* (also von Positionen darüber, wie etwas funktionieren *soll*) dar.

If we thus inquire in what sense the functional critique satisfies the requirements of the question at issue (Can it provide substantive criteria for the intrinsic wrongness of capitalism?), so let us put on record:

- A functional argument **does fulfill these requirements**, or at least accords with them [*wenn sie denn stimmt*], of **uncovering a problematic that is systematic and specific to capitalism**. However: Even if it accords [*stimmte*] (thus: even were it to successfully identify such a crisis-ridden attribute of capitalism), it would still suffer on the basis that **a functional argument so drawn up cannot so easily circumvent the normative question** (why capitalism is *wrong*). It remains therefore **dependent on normative criteria** that it leaves, by not making them explicit, unaccounted for.
- Now, this must not however be taken to mean that the functional moment and the question of possible dysfunctions of capitalist social and economic systems are unimportant or entirely without object. Even if, as I have argued, such an analysis cannot simply substitute for normative assessment, so conversely does normative position-taking still concern not least of all the “material,” which emerges from such considerations that are oriented to the question of functionality. (Even if therefore the criteria of ecological sustainability and the question of distributive justice are brought to bear *by us* on the capitalist economic system, we do so on the basis of analyses, which show us that and why such points of view are today frustrated by this system.)

The significance of functional aspects and the “functional critique of capitalism” reaches, however, in my opinion still further; it concerns a **central systematic issue**. Namely, I believe (and I will return to this below) that we quite as a matter of principle (thus already on a basic conceptual level) **contemplate the normative and the functional moments together in both directions and must represent them as mutually entangled**. Sociocultural forms of life and social institutions are general entities, which cannot be characterized only by their capacity to fall into crises. They fall into crises, so I want to claim, characteristically always already also being *normative crises*. Conversely, however, **normative crises also always have a functional aspect**: They are normative *and* they are crises, thus also functionally deficient; they express themselves as practical problems and upheavals. Thus even if the indicator of a functional deficit is dependent on a normative element, the indicator (e.g., the undermining of conditions for continued existence) is not trivial. And there remains a difference, whether we regard poverty as a self-generated disintegration problem of civil society, as Hegel did, or as simply morally scandalous.

Let us turn now to the other two forms of the critique of capitalism, which in contrast to the functional argument contain a more or less explicit normative point of reference, thus

an *assessment* [*Bewertung*] of the situation (as right or wrong). As explained above, there are in this case two versions of this normative critique of capitalism, and the difference between them stands in need of explanation. If we attribute a motive broadly to the theme that we frequently designate as the **question of the good life**, so it seems we can refer alternatively to what we can interpret as the moral **problem of justice** (in the narrow sense).¹⁰

2. The Moral Critique of Capitalism

I want to deal now with the moral or justice-oriented critique of capitalism. I am going to proceed by grappling with what may be interpreted as a justice-theoretical element in Marx and not by engaging directly with modern theories of justice, since these do not set out to be critiques of capitalism *as such* but rather, at best, critiques of consequences that capitalism (can) have.

How exactly does this critique go? The **moral or justice-oriented argumentation**, as I said, protests that **capitalism is premised upon injustice**, accordingly producing and reproducing an unjust societal structure. In seeking out such a dimension of the critique of capitalism, it is obviously bound up with the theorem of **exploitation**. The outrage over exploitation, so it seems in any case, corresponds the most to Marx as well as to the everyday understanding of moral and justice-theoretical argumentation against capitalism, or in any case it appears to mostly correspond.¹¹

According to this critique, capitalism thus exploits human beings by depriving them of the fruits of their own labor in an unfair and unjust way, and they are forced, as if by extortion, into enslavement by a system that in a variety of ways defrauds them of that to which they are entitled.

Now I do not want here to examine the empirical credibility of such an argumentation, which has high mobilizing power and can claim, in view of much factual evidence, much plausibility for itself; rather, I want to deal with the vagaries of this mode of argumentation as such.

Now, the problem with this strategy lay already in the conceptualization of exploitation, referring thereby however to a conceptual problem in the moral critique of capitalism itself.

¹⁰ Lässt sich das eine Motiv grob der Thematik zurechnen, die man häufig als Frage nach dem *guten Leben* bezeichnet, so scheint das andere auf das zu verweisen, was man als das moralische Problem der *Ungerechtigkeit* (im engeren Sinn) verstehen kann.

¹¹ Die Empörung über Ausbeutung, so scheint es jedenfalls, entspricht sowohl bei Marx als auch im Alltagsverständnis der moralisch-gerechtigkeits-theoretischen Argumentation gegen den Kapitalismus am meisten oder scheint ihr jedenfalls am meisten zu entsprechen.

- We could understand exploitation as it is suggested to us by everyday moral intuitions: Then it is, as Bernard Williams has named it, a “thick concept,” thus a concept in which assessment and description are inextricably bound up with one another so that it makes no sense in this connection even to ask whatever can be wrong with exploitation. If we want to make it the yardstick of critique, however, this intuitively plausible morally-argumentative concept of exploitation poses the question, whether it is here factually dealing with a specific problem *of capitalism* or “only” that there happens in capitalism to *also* be exploitation.
- On the other hand, the **Marxist variant of the exploitation** question functions notoriously differently: Here, exploitation is a **technical-analytic concept** that aims to describe how the capitalist economic form functions. This concept of exploitation, however, which is tailored directly to be able to comprehend specifically *capitalist* relations, suffers under the notorious problem that it, so far as it simply just describes the general modes through which capitalism functions, do not at all appear to be in a position to criticize it as normatively (or morally) deficient.

In order to elucidate this problematic, in what follows, *first*, I will inquire into what exploitation is in general—according to our preconceptions. *Second*, I will elucidate **the role of the concept of exploitation in Marx**. And finally I want to show that the difficulties with the concept of exploitation (in Marx) and the respective difficulties of its normative classification may only be resolved if we **change perspective and interpret exploitation before the more specific and respectively broader background of capitalism as a form of life**. It is then, to put in Hegelian terms, the “capitalist ethical life [*Sittlichkeit*]” that is in the sights of the Marxist critique. And it is **against the background of this perspective that the “moral failure” of capitalism can be first understood**. From these considerations [*Umstand*], we may draw inferences about the prospects for a moral critique of capitalism in general, while respectively highlighting a couple of general problems of such an approach.

Exploitation in General (Everyday Understanding)

Look at what we can call the everyday understanding of exploitation. There are several broadly diffused intuitions about exploitation.

Child labor is exploitation. Whoever allows their products to be manufactured in *sweat shops* of the impoverished countries of the developing world [*Trikont*] (or purchases such products), profits from the exploitation of local populations. A therapist who engages in sexual relations with a patient is exploiting that patient emotionally. But also phenomena such as prostitution and surrogate motherhood constitute potential relations of exploitation

under the purview of critique. Already this brief account of (more or less controversial) moments of exploitation shows the complexity of the concept of exploitation. The discourse on “exploitation” appears, at first encounter, to imply the following:

- That someone is exploited means on the one hand that he does not receive what he *deserves*, in the sense of an idea of fair exchange. Exploitation refers in this sense to the *quantitative inadequacy* of exchange relations.
- Certainly, it is not just that child labor pays too poorly. And also the suspicion that “surrogate motherhood” could be treated as a relation of exploitation does not hinge primarily on inadequate financial compensation. The suspicion that tacks it to the concept of exploitation is here much more that an exchange relation is being conducted where an exchange relation ought not to be conducted. Exploitation, so it appears at least, refers therewith to the *qualitative inadequacy* of an exchange relation (which we can spell out in terms of instrumentalization, disrespect, or reification).
- And lastly there are, in all these relations, a kind of asymmetry and an unequal distribution of power in play.

What does all of this mean for a critique of capitalism based on the claim of exploitation? As far as it depends on this (complex) everyday understanding, it appears to some extent **clear in what sense capitalism could be a (moral) evil** to the extent that we can say that it implies exploitation. (And I had already mentioned above that these troubles [*Umstände*] and phenomena have and have had a high mobilizing capacity for movements guided by the critique of capitalism.) To be sure, **it is not clear whether this applies to an evil that is specific to capitalism**. After all, there are child labor, the slave trade, and further grave forms of exploitative oppression and degradation in precapitalist societies as well. And after all the champions of the free market will not tire of stressing that the in their eyes deplorable excesses of capitalist globalization (*sweat shops*, child labor) is to be blamed on the fact that the capitalist market is still not yet fully established rather than on the market itself.

If we want to take up the moral (based on exploitation) critique, we must therefore show that even the relations *not* drawn by these blatant and obvious signs of pauperization and exploitation are still based on exploitation—that there is thus also exploitation beyond the Oliver Twist scenarios that are yet today unfortunately all too real. Above all however we must show that there is a *specific kind of exploitation* for capitalism that is worthy of criticism. Therefore: **We must not only claim that capitalism also exploits human beings—as did feudal society or the slave-holding society of antiquity—but that it does so systematically and in a specific and distinct way by other relations**. It is on these

grounds that it is interesting to look at **Marx's concept of exploitation**, which we may suppose is **addressed to capitalism** and deals precisely with the question of the systematic-necessary character of exploitation (and injustice).

Exploitation in Marx

How does it thus look with Marx's theory of exploitation? I have already signaled the double significance of its understanding of exploitation:

On the one hand Marx, too, appears to align with the relations sketched above. If Marx calls for "overturning all relations in which man [is] a demeaned, subjugated, abandoned, disdained being," then on the one hand it can be hard to mistake that a *moral outrage* is here being expressed. Exploitation is one of the evils that human beings experience from human beings. A societal order that rests upon or conveys this evil is worthy of critique. Otherwise, to be sure, as in the everyday understanding sketched by me, "exploitation" in Marx is however on the other hand also an *analytic-technical concept*, which only partially coincides with the everyday understanding of the concept. Against the background of the Marxist labor theory of value, exploitation is understood as appropriation of the surplus labor of the workers by capitalism, i.e., as appropriation of that which the worker has acquired in addition to what is necessary for the reproduction of one's labor power or as the appropriation of surplus value. (The scale of exploitation follows thus from the difference between the actual daily labor time and the labor time per day necessary for the reproduction of labor power, the degree of exploitation by the rate of surplus value, i.e., by the ratio of surplus labor to necessary labor, paid to unpaid labor.) Exploitation is however not therefore predation in capitalism. It does not rest on open relations of domination or direct violence [*Gewalt*], but on the indirect coercion [*Zwang*] of the circumstances [*Umstände*] (cf. Elster 1978).

Normative Ambiguities of the Exploitation Concept

Now, such an understanding of exploitation has, among others, the following consequence: Exploitation, by this analysis, is not in the first place compassion-worthy child labor (relations like those so well provided by Marx), but altogether quite normal wage labor. Yet conversely, "exploitation" is, in the just-sketched technical sense, not primarily a moral scandal, but simply describes capitalism's mode of functioning. Exploitation would then be a mere **neutral description of that which capitalism simply does**, insofar as it is in a sense the condition of capitalism's functioning.

If therefore Marx describes exploitation as a skimming of surplus product and therewith as a relation inherent in all wage labor that produces surplus value—does this mean a *banalization* [Entdramatisierung] of the concept of exploitation or is it, conversely, a *valorization* [Dramatisierung] of the evils that accompany *wage labor*? And further: Can it be that Marx was here in a position to get to the bottom of the capitalism-specific character of exploitation only at the cost of letting the critique-worthiness of these relations effectively slip through his fingers?¹²

We must come to terms here with the fact [*Umstand*] that Marx claims, disconcertingly, that the mode of production analyzed by him is **not in itself unjust**. “In itself”: thus once we have (as I would interpret it here) accepted the basic conditions and prerequisites of capitalist economics, we are left with no problem to demonstrate and with that nothing to criticize. Does this, however, then effectively allow only the conclusion that exploitation, according to Marx, is not supposed to be a relation that is normatively problematic and worthy of critique?

I find this implausible. In order to understand for certain the (normative) status of the Marxist explication of exploitation, and to understand from which normative standpoint Marx actually criticized capitalism, it is important to remember in which context it stands, before which prerequisites, and in which situation the Marxist critique of capitalism operates, respectively.

Domination Made More Effective

Marx wants to explain the **ongoing effects of domination and exploitation beneath the objective cover** [*unter der sachlichen Hülle*] of the capitalist economy and the contractual relations of civil society—thus we can understand the project of a “Critique of Political Economy.” If “the real institutional innovation of the capitalist economy” is the existence of a free labor market, and this is characterized by being based on free entry into contracts and the idea of equivalence (labor against wages, i.e., wages as compensation for labor instead of compulsory labor and compulsory levies), then it is not easy to see at first glance in what sense these relations can be relations of exploitation. Even if we invoice the misery in labor relations to early capitalism: Neither the compulsory character (the absence of free will) nor the inequality of the relations here entered into are obvious among relations of civil society (bourgeois-capitalist market socialization).

¹² Und weiter: Kann es sein, dass Marx hier zwar dem kapitalismusspezifischen Charakter der Ausbeutung auf den Grund zu gehen vermag, dass ihm dafür aber die Kritikwürdigkeit dieser Verhältnisse gewissermaßen durch die Lappen gegangen ist?

Marx thus **analyzes exploitation as (if also subtle) a relation of domination and compulsion. And the “technical character” of his analysis responds to the subtlety of these relations and to the structural, impersonal character of the coercion involved.** Precisely this set of conditions [*Umstand*] however gives us the chance to understand the difference, indeed somewhat disconcerting at first glance, between our everyday understanding, with its apparent moral significance, and the just depicted Marxist understanding (in its ambiguity).

Moral or Ethical Significance of the Concept of Exploitation?

My thesis is that **we can only solve the problem of the *normative-critical character of the Marxist theory of exploitation*** (and its so astonishing dismissal of moral implications), if we try to comprehend the Marxist critique **not as a moral critique in the narrower sense** (and justice-theoretically underpinned in the narrower sense), but instead understand it as an ***ethically inspired critique***, or in other words: **as a critique that applies to the form of life of capitalism in its entirety** and therewith to the relations that are responsible for the structure of emotionless domination and invisible coercion (and therewith facilitate a specific mode of exploitation).

What is *wrong*, then, is not the fact that the mode of production *in itself* rests on exploitation (of surplus product).¹³ This is just how it functions, and this is unassailable according to its own—internal—standards of justice. *That* it functions in this way, however, is nevertheless a problem: **What is wrong is the mode of production itself.** The character of this wrong [*Falschheit*] however is then, and this is crucial, constituted differently than that of unjust exchange or unfair distribution. This is then no longer about injustice [*Unrecht*] in the narrow sense. Rather it pertains to **“injustice” [“*Unrecht*”] in the more comprehensive sense, that of an entire form of life, which enables such emotionless domination and the described dynamics of coercion in the first place.** The critique that is justice-theoretic or moral in the narrow sense would accordingly have to get involved with the analysis and critique of capitalism as a mode of production (and further: as a form of life), so long as it wants to approach capitalism as a *specific problem*. The problems that are *moral* in the narrow sense are not therefore **merely *unsolvable*, they can no longer be *understandable*, if we do not see it against the background of the problematic of the capitalist form of life** as a form of life. The “injustice” [“*Unrecht*”] of capitalism would then be “comprehensive” in the same sense as the discussion of “right” [“*Recht*”] in Hegel’s philosophy of right is comprehensive, so long as the discussion of “right” here encompasses in its entirety the

¹³ *Falsch* ist dann tatsächlich nicht die auf Ausbeutung (des Mehrprodukts) beruhende Produktionsweise *in sich*.

rationality and being-good [*Gutsein*] of a social order. And the specific evil of capitalism is not its unjust and immoral character, but its *unethicalness* (in the Hegelian sense), i.e., it is found wanting as an ethical relation.

Exploitation as “Absolute Injustice [Unrecht]”

I join here with the Georg Lohmann’s thesis, which sees in reference to Marx “two conceptions of justice” in his work: the *narrow* one of internal distributive justice and the *encompassing* one of the justice of a form of life as such, which thematizes the ***foundation of distribution and therewith the foundation of an entire form of life/mode of production.*** This then brings into view—as the thesis goes—not just the non-equivalence of wages but a ***qualitative inadequacy of world- and self-relations*** that emerges when labor is exchanged as abstract labor on a free market. With it, however, it would be not only the “qualitative dimension” of exploitation implemented above for the everyday understanding that is again overtaken.¹⁴ In any case, in reference to Marx, it then appears valid, that **the moral dimension of the evil of capitalism is on the other hand not “freestanding.”** It is only to be understood and **embedded in the “ethical” [“*sittliche*”] dimension of its expanding problematic.** (Therefore: The problem is not that labor contracts, with their purchasing of wage labor and promotion of productivity, are not just or that they are unfulfilling or that cheat somebody. This also happens frequently without doubt; however, the disputes around wages, working conditions, and the length of workdays are, from a certain perspective, simply “part of the game,” should one play it. And it does not even belong to the game, to enforce here another standpoint than that exemplified by the profit interests of those involved. If we want to criticize something here, then we must criticize “the game itself.” Then however we are criticizing, for example, the conditions [*Umstand*] that here generally negotiate and treat labor power as a commodity. **If however we do this, then the next step, we transcend the narrow limits of a justice-theoretic or moral critique, so long as we are speaking about the fundamental relations of the goods available in a society in qualitative perspective.**)

Summary: The Moral Critique

Three things result from the considerations sketched here for the moral critique and our leading question. Even if we assume that it successfully reveals measures of critique (and

¹⁴ Damit würde aber nicht nur der die oben für das Alltagsverständnis ausgeführte “qualitative Dimension” der Ausbeutung wieder eingeholt.

I make this assumption without problematizing it further), it still remains unspecific with reference to its object. In this perspective it would then be (against the background of the given definition of the task), on the other hand, “not independent [*alleinstehend*],” i.e., in order to make it more specific and less impotent, we must embed it in an analysis of the “ethical [*sittlichen*] relation” that is capitalism and therewith also in an analysis of the structural conditions that are provided with it, which transport the morally (and distribution-theoretically) problematic “output.” This all culminates in a perspective [*Perspective*] that Marx takes over from Hegel in the accusation of “**empty ought**” [*leeren Sollens*] and the peculiar helplessness of a moral critique of capitalist relations.

With this I come to the ethical [*ethischen*] critique of capitalism.

3. The Ethical Critique of Capitalism

To review, the *ethical critique of capitalism* claims, in several variations, the following: The life that is stamped [*gepräg*te] by capitalism is a **bad or an alienated life**. It is **impoverished, meaningless, or empty** and it destroys the essential components of whatever belongs to a fulfilled, happy, but above all “veritably free” human life. In short, the ethical critique thematizes capitalism as a world- and self-relation. It thematizes it from the perspective of how it influences our full connection to life, our relation to our selves and to the world, and things. Moreover, critiques of this kind are as old as capitalism itself.

Toward the symptoms meant here of the capitalist mode of life, we count, for example, phenomena of *objectification* and qualitative impoverishment of life-relations, as they have been criticized [*monieren*] ever since the beginning of capitalist development. In this reference, we, in taking stock, may yet glean from the very lofty tone of Werner Sombart’s *Modern Capitalism*, where quite mawkishly the personal relation of precapitalist peasant woman to her cows are set against the objectifying and calculating relation of capitalism to the creature and things. With quite different depth of field (and quite different consciousness of ambivalence) does Georg Simmel’s *Philosophy of Money* also concern itself with objectification as a fundamental tendency of modern life (coined [*gepräg*te] by the capitalist economy of exchange). And as a problem of *marketization* and, respectively, commercialization and commodification, it concerns us as well today in entirely unforeseen dimensions. Toward the symptoms problematized by the ethical critique, however, count also from early on the critique of institutionalized *greed* and the never idle *dynamism* of capitalism. And also the psychic and spiritual vacancy, the impoverishment and superficiality of a world constricted by mercantile interests in “instrumentalities” [*Zweckhafte*] have become frequent objects of more than just literary contemplation.

Meaning of the Ethical Perspective

I consider this—*nota bene*—to be a sensible perspective on the reality of capitalist relations and also a sensible path of critique. That capitalism also has a “culture” and that it shapes [*prägt*] and necessitates a determinate mode of life, is a set of conditions [*Umstand*] that is relevant not just in reference to the question of what allows individuals to really “suffer under capitalism.”

Unquestionably, the power of the ethical critique of capitalism consists at minimum in that it makes clear conditions [*Umstand*] that frequently remain concealed: Conditions [*Umstand*], namely, that are negotiated in capitalism around a societal and economic form that rests generally on something such as values, thus implying value-judgments or bringing them forth. So it becomes somewhat clear, regarding the critique of marketization tendencies, that it doesn't enact a neutral distribution-scheme [*Verteilungsinstanz*] of goods in the market, but rather that goods are given a specified character [*Prägung*].

What is thus still successfully clarified by the most culturally conservative and nostalgic variants of an ethical critique of capitalism, is that the condition [*Umstand*] that the economic sphere—e.g., the commercial transactions in the capitalist market—is not ethically neutral. *How* and *what* is being done, is the expression of a particular form of life and worldview, which precludes or at least influences other forms of life and world-conceptions. That particular things, skills, and relationships are to be conceptualized as “commodities,” means not merely that they are to be translated—in an ethically neutral way—into another medium. Things are to be conceived as expendable [*entäußerliche*] against other goods (and against the common medium of money, respectively) as interchangeable objects, coining [*prägt*] a quite particular conception of objects, relationships, and capabilities. And that “commodity labor power” (on whose existence capitalism is well-known to be based) is conceived as just such, just as “commodity,” is anything other than self-evident and has corresponding consequences for our relation to what we do (in laboring).

It appears however to be quite characteristic for capitalism to deny this value-character, and therewith the circumstances [*Umstand*] by which a *particular form of life* is enacted within it—which we can and must accordingly also *evaluate* and as a result have alternatives.¹⁵ Perhaps this is already sufficient grounds—this would be a kind of meta-grounds—to accept that something is rotten in capitalism. (according to the motto: “Whoever hides something has something to bury.”)

¹⁵ Es scheint aber geradezu charakteristisch für den Kapitalismus zu sein, dass er diesen Wertcharakter, und damit den Umstand, dass es sich bei ihm um eine *bestimmte Lebensform* handelt—die man dementsprechend auch *bewerten* kann und muss und die demzufolge auch Alternativen haben muss, leugnet.

Problems of the Ethical Critique

The problems of such an ethical critique of capitalism (in reference to the criteria we have been pursuing) are, however, apparent:

- The *first problem* (in the sense of the issue raised above regarding the *specific wrong* of capitalism) is the following:

Even the ethical critique deems itself to be confronted with the problem that it is not always clear which of the symptoms that it presents are in fact *of a specifically capitalist nature*. Does it really have to do with capitalism, or does it not have much more to do with modernity in general? (And how are the two related to each other, in cases of doubt?) And naturally the expansion of the money economy and market influences the relation to people and things; however, there are naturally severe forms of instrumentalization—one can think just of the slave trade—in very differently styled societal formations. Thus, regarding the current tendencies of “expansion of the market” (from surrogate motherhood to modern mercenary armies), they cannot be criticized until it is shown how they under capitalist conditions have assumed *specific and different forms*. (Incidentally, I believe that it goes, thus that could one show such a thing, it would only seldom be done.)¹⁶

- More pressing however is the *second problem*, which [concerns] the identifiability of *criteria* for the critique in question. Namely, what is problematic in the features listed by me? We can differentiate the indifference of the market from concrete properties such as the leveling of heterogeneities—and thereby criticize them as a reduction of meaning and a form of “impoverishment.” We can denounce the objectification and depersonalization of social relations as atomization and instrumentalization. We can criticize the relinquishment of certain features and skills as objectivating and reifying. But on the one hand many of these diagnoses turn on *cultural criticism and cultural pessimism*, which tends in each case to nostalgically romanticize previous ways of life, with their products, practices, and customs. If we were confident, with the introduction of the railway, that its speed is leading inevitably to insanity, so today we praise the tranquility of the railway as “genuine, meaningful experience of traveling” against the acceleration of life forced by *EasyJet*; and if the introduction of labor-divided assembly line work was synonymous with alienated labor and inhuman disciplining, so in retrospect the “Fordist” system of general interest

¹⁶ (Ich glaube übrigens, dass das geht, dass man also so etwas zeigen könnte, es wird nur selten getan.)

[*Daseinsfürsorge*] has already become nearly vindicated as sowing identity and community attachment against the identity-destroying and quality-reducing [*entqualifizierenden*] dynamics and experience-improvement of the new, “flexible capitalism.” Anyway the principle of nostalgia at work here, all things considered, allows one to doubt how reliable and productive the operative criteria really are.

In any case, more devastating still in this regard is certainly the *ambivalence* of many of the phenomena taken into view by the ethical critique of capitalism. Not to no purpose is Georg Simmel’s description of modern life under the sign of interchangeability and of money—an until now unsurpassed achievement in describing capitalism as a form of life—markedly *ambivalent*. Indifference to special relationships and the intrinsic properties of goods, you see, *also* means freedom. The disconnectedness [*Bindungslosigkeit*] conveyed by money *also* means independence. And—with all its vagueness and rigidity [*Härten*—insofar as the free labor market has replaced feudal status orders [*Dienstverhältnis*], the (capitalist) market stands not just on effectiveness (in as much as it does that), but as the institution of contracts itself it embodies *also* an *ethical* principle, [in] which the freedom of modernity as a freedom of choice consists in living one’s life independently of others.¹⁷

This *ambivalence* of the phenomena portrayed is a further indicator for that it is not at all that easy to reveal the ethical criteria by means of which we can repudiate with reasons certain aspects of the capitalist form of life. From where thus do we take our *measure*? And how consequently are we to conduct a critique of capitalism that is promising and has traction, which does not slide into a more pure (and abstract) discourse about virtue (the appeal to values)? (We must free ourselves from greed and remember the “real” [*“Echte”*]: all correct, perhaps, but rather helpless.)

Summary and Conclusion

Let me briefly pool together the results of my above reflections. Sought after was a critique that was relevant to capitalism in a *specific* way (and as a specific societal and economic organization), which at the same time could be *revealed normatively*. Accordingly, we had:

¹⁷ Und—bei all seinen Tücken und Härten—sofern der freie Arbeitsmarkt das feudale Dienstverhältnis abgelöst hat, steht der (kapitalistische) Markt nicht nur für Effektivität (wenn er das denn tut), sondern verkörpert als Institution des Vertrags selbst *auch* ein *ethisches* Prinzip, das der Freiheit der Moderne als einer Freiheit des Wählens, die auch darin besteht, unabhängig von anderen sein Leben zu leben.

- (1) shown the functional critique to surely be (where it is plausible) specific but not normatively freestanding, so long as the evidence of dysfunctionalities remain bound to value-standards that is cannot generate or vindicate out of itself.
- (2) The moral or justice-theoretic critique, on the other hand, had the problem that it is *not specific to capitalism*, thus failing to account for capitalism as a specific source of a defined moral evil. (This now is not necessarily a problem for this position by itself.) Thus, even if we accept (and this might even be accepted without what I have specifically dealt with or established) that its normative measures are valid, it incurs (since Hegel's critique of Kant) the notorious charge of the "impotence of the moral ought." Even then, the moral critique appears not to be wrong but in a sense incomplete. However we might assess the possibilities of a (non-moralizing) immanently summoned critique of capitalism, as Marx had in mind, it should be noted that the moral or justice-theoretic critique has a relation toward its object that from the start amounts to a "black box approach." It is thus oriented to effects, while lacking focus on the specific dynamics and constitution of economic and social institutions that bring about these effects.
- (3) The ethical critique had, apart from (possibly repairable) weaknesses with the specific frame of its object, the problem of identifying its normative criteria: a problem, from which in turn a standstill in a (just as "empty") discourse on virtue threatens to result.

The result of my account of "three paths of the critique of capitalism" portrays itself as follows: All three are, on the one hand, fruitful in certain measures, but, on the other hand, each of them prove deficient in various ways. In such a situation there are several alternatives. Strictly put there is nothing speaking against criticizing an existing societal formation on "multiple fronts." And so we could posit thus, that each of these respective dimensions of the problematic of the capitalist economic and societal order sometimes (but not always) intersect one another through these variously retraced paths of critique and that these critical perspectives sometimes (but not always) mutually illuminate each other. There is then perhaps not *one specific* (only established [*geltende*] for this) problem of capitalism, where the critique of it must start out and there is no *one measure* of its critique that is universally and for all time unquestionably valid [*geltenden*] (in any case not the one and valid measure for a critique that pertains to all dimensions of "life in capitalism"). Especially in terms of the ethical dimension, we might then in a number of cases content ourselves with

checking the plausibility [*Plausibilisierung*] of the background of established [*geltender*] cultural self-relations.¹⁸

I want nevertheless to at the very least take account of a couple of reflections, in a short prospectus and stemming out of the deficits of this last, ethical form of critique, which could lead to a stronger (or less modest) result.

The hypothesis to follow, then, runs thusly: The above-sketches dimensions of the critique of capitalism do not just have strengths and weaknesses that can be inferred from different spheres of application. But they *come together* in a position to generate criteria for a critique of the capitalist societal and economic system. In other words: These weaknesses can then be resolved if we pull these three “dimensions”—no longer “paths”!—together. A critique of *capitalism as a form of life* (that is my suggestion for the overarching title of such an approach) would thus be one, where all three dimensions—the functional, the moral, the ethical deficit—would have to be set in relation to one another. (Mind you: The question of whether such a critique would be reform-oriented or “radical,” thus aiming at complete transformation or abolition, is for the time being not touched upon and depends on its conclusions.)

Prospectus: Critique of Capitalism as Form of Life

How can we critique *capitalism as a form of life*?

I would like to (and can) close with only a couple of notes.

- It would be crucial to such a critique, as already suggested, to *specify* the “ethical shortcomings” of capitalism, thus to investigate the special qualities and dynamics to be assumed, for example, the instrumentalization and the greed of “the insatiable” [*Mehrhabenwollens*] under conditions of capitalist capital accumulation. (This means, so we could formulate it: investigating the institutionalized greed and the institutionalized instrumentalization, which may be effective under capitalist relations.)
- *Second*, it is valid to carve out the moments of the suggested ethical problematic, which may be identified as self-contradictions in the sense of an immanent critique. The critique of alienation and objectification, for example, garners a quite different, much less nostalgic payoff, if we analyze these elements as a frustration of the modern promise of freedom and self-determination taken as such.

¹⁸ Gerade was die ethische Dimension angeht, mag man sich dann in einigen Fällen mit einer Plausibilisierung auf dem Hintergrund geltender kultureller Selbstverständnisse begnügen.

- With that comes, *third*, the path of critique again to its right, which I discussed at the beginning: It is the intertwining of *functional disturbances* in the sense of practical crises and convulsions *and* normative deficits, that can hold good as perspective for the irrationality and wrongness of capitalism as a form of life. With that the functional aspect criticized above indeed gets its (limited) right: Surely a form of life such as capitalism has always failed normatively. However, *that* we do not want to live so is not simply an ethical value-judgment descended from the heavens (or out of tradition). It coheres for its part together with functional deficits and the practical convulsions and crises that come with them. And the bottom line is now to correctly comprehend the penetration of both moments.
- With that let us finally define for such a critique a kind of meta-criterion, which evades the contingency of substantial ethical positions: A successful form of life would then be one that has the feature of not hindering but facilitating successful collective learning processes—learning processes that may be triggered in part by crises of a functional sort. Whether capitalism does this is more questionable.

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