

Hans-Georg Backhaus (1929-2026)

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Hans-Georg Backhaus, who coined the term ‘New Marx Reading’ in the 1970s, recently passed away.¹ He was born in Remda in eastern Germany in 1929 and would have turned 97 this year. He died in Frankfurt am Main, where he spent most of his career as a philosopher and economist. In 1969 he published his pathbreaking essay ‘On the Dialectics of the Value-Form’ or ‘Zur Dialektik der Wertform’ in the anthology *Beiträge zur marxistischen Erkenntnistheorie (Contributions to a Marxist Theory of Knowledge)* edited by Alfred Schmidt. While this essay didn’t appear in a vacuum, Backhaus nevertheless inaugurated a new critical way to read, interpret and use Marx’s theory, which we now call ‘New Marx Reading’ or ‘value-form theory’. The essay has been translated into more than ten languages and continues to be a source of knowledge, inspiration and controversy. From the early 1960s Backhaus collaborated with Helmut Reichelt (b. 1939), whose *Zur logischen Struktur des Kapitalbegriffs bei Karl Marx (The Logical Structure of Karl Marx’s Concept of Capital)* from 1970 also helped pave the way for the new reading of Marx. Several of Backhaus’s texts from the years 1969-1997 are collected in *Dialektik der Wertform. Untersuchungen zur Marxschen Ökonomiekritik (Dialectics of the Value-Form: Investigations of a Marxian Critique of Economy)* (Ça ira-Verlag, 1997). Another volume of essays has been in the works for several years at Ça ira, but it is unclear whether it is going to be released. One can only hope that it will!

The New Marx Reading that Backhaus was part of developing from the mid-1960s until his death can be understood both in a narrow and in a broad sense. In a broad sense, the New Marx Reading was part of larger social developments, mostly in the West, characterised by the New Left, the student movement and other new social movements, opposition to the Vietnam War, and so on. In a narrower sense, the New Marx Reading sought

to break with traditional Marxist orthodoxy, not least the form of historical materialism that Moscow was spreading around the world. Backhaus was part of the New Marx Reading in both senses, even though he had the university and not the street as his base.

Backhaus’s residence in Frankfurt am Main and his editor Schmidt signal the theoretical milieu that he was a part of – the Frankfurt School and critical theory, which Max Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno initiated during the 1930s and were active in until their passing in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Backhaus studied under both of them, and Adorno played an especially decisive role in his theoretical development. The unpublished volume of Backhaus texts mentioned earlier includes material more explicitly related to Adorno; the working title is ‘Marx, Adorno, und die Kritik der Wirtschaftslehre’ (‘Marx, Adorno, and the Critique of Economic Theory’).

Backhaus’s essay ‘On the Dialects of the Value-Form’ has an entertaining origin-story that suggests how chance plays a role in the history of ideas. The text began as a lecture that Backhaus gave in one of Adorno’s seminars during the winter of 1964-65, and which he later developed into his diploma thesis in 1968. So far, pretty standard, except for the titillating theoretical context of Adorno’s seminars in the 1960s. But Backhaus had discovered a rare copy of the first edition of Marx’s *Capital* from 1867 in the open library that belonged to the Social Democrat Hermann Brill, which was housed in the Walter Kolb student dormitory. From his first encounter with the book, Backhaus could see that the text differed significantly from the second edition of *Capital* from 1872 (as well as from the third and fourth editions edited by Engels), which has become the canonical version of Marx’s magnum opus. In reading the first edition of *Capital*, Backhaus was reminded of Adorno’s lectures on dialectics and Hegel, themes that were more apparent in this ver-

sion of the book than in later edited editions. Backhaus had learned the concept of *Verdopplung* (doubling) in a lecture by Horkheimer's colleague Karl Heinz Haag, a concept which is found throughout the first edition of *Capital* and in the *Grundrisse*, the extensive manuscript that Marx worked on during 1857-1858, and which is an important precursor to *Capital*. Backhaus understood early on that the concept of doubling was a key term for understanding Marx's dialectics. Central to Marx's theory of value is the doubling of the commodity as both a sensual thing and money – an expression of the commodity's double character as both use value and exchange value. Marx's analysis of the contradictory nature of the commodity leads logically to an understanding of money as the commodity's necessary form of expression.

There are two letters Marx wrote to Engels that also had an important influence on Backhaus's theoretical development. The first, from 2 April 1858, concerns Marx's early understanding and presentation of value-form theory, where he discusses the contents of a manuscript from the same year (known today as 'Urtext,' or the first draft of the critique of political economy), specifically its first part on value, which still isn't available to us. The second letter from 9 December 1861, regards Marx's method and, as he wrote to Engels, his intention to hide the way he developed his critique of political economy – to, as it were, cover up his tracks. The first letter provides a short sketch of how Marx thought about presenting the concept of value a decade before *Capital* was published, while the second letter offers a clue as to why it is so difficult to understand Marx's method, not least concerning the structure of *Capital*. Marx's letters gave Backhaus somewhere to take footing in his efforts to reconstruct Marx's theory of value during the 1970s. Backhaus published the first three parts of this effort in the journal *Gesellschaft* that he edited, while the fourth part remained unpublished until the 1997 selection of his essays. One of Backhaus's early contributions is precisely his comparison between different versions of Marx's conception of the value-form, and what these conceptions mean for our understanding of the role of value in the whole of *Capital*.

In his essay 'On the Dialectics of the Value-Form' Backhaus argues that the confused and incorrect interpretations of Marx's theory of value perpetuated by traditional and basically positivist Marxists, especially

as regards the first chapter of *Capital*, aren't merely the fault of Marx's readers. Rather, Backhaus claims that there is something problematic, if not incorrect, about how Marx develops his theory and justifies his transitions between categories. One of the basic problems that Backhaus identifies is a methodological one regarding the relationship between content and form, essence and appearance. Backhaus claims that Marx doesn't answer his own question – 'why this content assumes this form' – explicitly enough. In other words, in the first chapter of *Capital* the relationship between content and form doesn't appear as necessary and internal, but rather as external and contingent.



From the beginning Backhaus emphasises the subtitle to Marx's *Capital: Critique of Political Economy*. Marx's project is emphatically one of *critique*; both of the theory of political economy and of capitalism as a political economy. Marx doesn't therefore provide us with a better kind of economics than bourgeois economics, but rather a critique of the economy as economy, both in and of itself and in its theorisation. Backhaus rejected standard

reconstructions of Marx's labour theory of value, arguing that they were basically refinements of David Ricardo's theory of value. For Backhaus, the key text for understanding Marx's theory of value is the famous fourth subsection of chapter one of *Capital*: 'The fetishism of the commodity and its secret'. As anyone who has read this section knows, it is not about economic theory in any conventional sense. There aren't many economists today who would describe a commodity or service as 'a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.' Yet Marx does exactly that in the section on commodity fetishism. Marx's development of the concept of value isn't dialectical ornamentation or Hegelian hocus pocus but should rather be understood fairly literally. His is an economic-philosophic critique of economic theory, an immanent critique that traces concepts and categories to their genesis. For Marx and for Backhaus these categories are necessary – often contradictory and one-sided – expressions of capitalist relations. Economic categories are for Marx *socially valid, objective ideas* of capitalist relations of production.

Commodity fetishism and reification are fundamental themes in all of Backhaus's work, which explores how social relations appear in things and relations between things appear as social, human relations. The category of the fetish is the theoretical basis for the 'objectivity of value' in Marx, where value is something supra-individual, social, as it were unintentional and *objective* – a human creation, even if made behind the backs of individuals. Backhaus employed this conception of value while engaging with more conventional, bourgeois (if you like) economists, who continually appear in his texts – both well-known economists such as Joseph Schumpeter and Joan Robinson, and relatively forgotten ones such as Alfred Amonn and Friedrich von Gottl-Ottlilienfeld, who discussed monetary theory in the 1920s. In his introduction to *Dialektik der Wertform* entitled 'Zuvor,' where he looks back over his essays, it becomes clear to Backhaus that another fundamental theme is the so-called problem of constitution, or what constitutes bourgeois society and the categories of polit-

ical economy; these are concerns that can again be traced back to Adorno's philosophy. Backhaus's new reading of Marx, which isn't so new any longer, should therefore be understood as a critical social theory, or, if you will, a theoretical critique of society, which remains highly relevant today.²

For nearly sixty years Backhaus has encouraged us not to fear philosophy and the careful exposition of concepts, even when it comes to apparently economic questions. Regardless of which way the winds are blowing he has asked us to focus on what it is we want to change, why, and on which premises. Through showing us Marx's relevance, Backhaus has embodied the necessity of developing and critically testing precisely that relevance. That he, at the age of 96, was listed as number fifteen on the ballot for the populist BSW in Frankfurt – Sahra Wagenknecht's anti-establishment party – shouldn't be allowed to overshadow his work. Even a good dialectician can falter in their power of judgement, which shows in its own way the dilemma of critical theory in the bourgeois public sphere.

Translated by Joel Duncan

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Notes

1. This article was first published in Swedish on *Site Zones*. See <https://www.sitezones.net>.
2. Along with the texts mentioned above from Backhaus's *Dialektik der Wertform*, the author would like to recommend an excellent overview of the New Marx Reading by Riccardo Bellofiore & Tommaso Redolfi Riva: 'The Neue Marx-Lektüre. Putting the critique of political economy back into the critique of society', *Radical Philosophy* 189 (2015): 24–36. <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/the-neue-marx-lekture>.