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Charles A Prusik

Adorno and Neoliberalism: The Critique of Exchange Society

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Reviewed by Iaan Reynolds

In *Adorno and Neoliberalism: The Critique of Exchange Society*, Charles A. Prusik argues that Adorno's critical theory can provide crucial resources for an understanding of neoliberal political economy and the forms of thought it generates, weaving an impressive knowledge of Adorno's works and their reception with deep familiarity with Marxist and classical political economy, neoclassical and neoliberal economics, and political history. Prusik's book is valuable for the way it works against the customary interpretation of the early Frankfurt School as a group of theorists departing from – rather than deepening – Marxist social theory. The Adorno of these pages is not so much an elitist forebear of apolitical aesthetics as a critic of capitalist society.

The book is divided into five substantive chapters, with a foreword by Deborah Cook, a thematic introduction, and a brief afterword. The introduction outlines recent discussions of neoliberalism and begins to make the case for Adorno as a theorist of this 'elusive object of analysis' (2). In Adorno's conception of the 'exchange society', Prusik argues, we find a clear commitment and critical modification of the Marxist critique of political economy. Although it was developed during a time of the Fordist-Keynesian postwar boom, and the integration of the working class that attended it, Adorno's 'approach to critical theory can be developed to comprehend neoliberalism', according to Prusik, 'because capitalism reproduces itself today through an increasingly abstract, integrated, and impersonal network of commodity exchanges that submits life to the constraints of accumulation' (4).

In the first chapter, Prusik convincingly argues for understanding Adorno's work as a critique of exchange society. This chapter's clear expositions of the fetish-character of the commodity, real abstraction and society as a negative totality help us understand the ramifications of Adorno's repeatedly stressed conception of socialization as a process mediated by exchange. Here, Prusik draws on the underappreciated work of Alfred Sohn-Rethel – an economist in the circle of the early Frankfurt School – to show how the economic categories of Marx's critique of political economy are understood by some Marxists of the early twentieth century (including Adorno) to constitute transcendental subjectivity itself. 'The apriority of the Kantian subject reflects the fetish character of the commodity; the constitution of the private, bourgeois "thought form" is grounded in the commodity-form' (27). The abstractions that veil exploitation in capitalist society are so intractable precisely because they have their basis in real social relations. But the apparent universality of these abstract concepts cannot totally cover over their origin in exploitation, and thus the possibility of their critique: 'However much society autonomizes itself from living subjects it remains a form of human practice' (37). Prusik thus closes this grounding chapter – to which the rest of the work will continually refer – with a clear exposition of

Adorno's conception of society as a negative totality. Since the forms in which society appears 'naturally' cover over their historical genesis in exploitative social relations, Adorno conceives of society itself as an 'antagonistic disunity that appears in the form of unity' (33).

According to Prusik, critics of neoliberalism who focus on income inequality or the apparent 'irreality' of finance capital fail to understand the underlying logic of neoliberalism. Tending to juxtapose neoliberal capital against the less-problematic Fordist-Keynesianism that predated it, these accounts miss out on the fundamental continuities between neoliberalism and earlier stages of capital accumulation. In chapter 2, these continuities are explored in order to show how the supposed changes in capitalism have only preserved the class antagonism underlying all forms of capitalist accumulation. 'That neoliberalism appears as an immaterial, virtual, and speculative phase of accumulation does not abrogate the critique of political economy and the law of value, but only confirms the fetishistic constitution of its forms of appearance' (52). Those accounts that stress the apparent discontinuity between neoliberalism's disintegration of public services and the postwar integration of the working class mistakenly take capitalist society's appearance for its truth. Engaging with the early Frankfurt School's debates on state capitalism, Adorno's analysis of monopoly capitalism and the history of neoliberalism, Prusik shows how neoliberal capitalism is best understood as 'a statist, class project' (70) continuous with the Fordist-Keynesian phase of accumulation preceding it.

Chapters 3 and 4 undertake a criticism of neoliberalism's theoretical advocates, focusing respectively on the works of Friedrich von Hayek and other early neoliberal thinkers, and the more recent turn towards the computational theory of mind. Through attention to economic theory's shift in emphasis from knowledge to information, Prusik shows how self-regulating markets become the locus of rationality for neoliberal theory after Hayek. Although locating rationality in distributed systems of pricing and exchange – rather than in individuals – simplifies the tools of economic analysis, the genesis and continual constitution of the capitalist relations making these systems possible remain as natural in their appearance as they had for classical and neoclassical liberals. By 'recognizing the impersonal autonomism of the capitalist object', according to Prusik, 'neoliberal economics remains blinded by the fetish character of the exchange abstraction' (103). Adorno's writings on sociology are used here to show the way in which this domination of reality by the illusions of market forms yields not only a continuation of exploitation by another name, but an empirically unsatisfying social and economic theory incapable of understanding the crises intrinsic to this form of subjectless rationality.

This insight is deepened in chapter 4, where Prusik turns to a consideration of neoliberal reason, as represented in the computational theory of mind. The modeling of capitalist social forms in every realm of human life has led, according to Prusik, to a reified conception of thought itself. 'Accumulation, according to Adorno, not only extracts surplus-value in production but also transforms the minds and bodies of workers' (127). In remaking the mind in the image of human artifice, philosophical advocates of the status quo install a conception of thought fundamentally rooted in the domination of nature as the horizon of all knowledge. Targeting this conception's development in functionalist philosophies of mind, Prusik suggests that we can view these theoretical approaches as the philosophical development of neoliberal ideology. It is necessary, as Prusik notes at the end of this chapter, to remember that critical theory's aim in recognizing the connections between exchange society and the forms of thought it engenders is ultimately to

free humanity through a recognition of the spell exerted on it by the ‘false unity of reason and domination’ (135).

The final chapter, which is perhaps the most suggestive of future work, shows how Adorno and Horkheimer’s analyses of culture can help us understand contemporary developments in internet technology. Expanding the critique of neoliberal theory to a consideration of a mass culture in which production and consumption become increasingly indistinguishable, Prusik shows how subjects of neoliberal capital are ‘[s]imultaneously capitalist and employee’ (154). The conditions of economic precarity are thus further exacerbated by the rule of a second nature of appearances, with attendant illusions and affective investments in authenticity and narcissistic self-regard, within a network of devices that becomes ever more able to shape, manipulate and capitalize on these preformations of experience.

The detailed analysis in these pages provides an accessible introduction not only to Adorno’s underappreciated social theory, but also to the Marxist critique of political economy, and the political economic history of our present. Most praiseworthy in this regard is the way Prusik connects apparently disparate parts of Adorno’s theoretical work, bringing his contributions to the ‘Positivism Dispute’, and his reflections on class theory and industrial society, seamlessly into contact with his better-known works on cultural critique. From his careful reconstructions, indeed, we see that the latter efforts are not so much a case of aesthetics separated from political concerns, as they are one part of a reflection on a negative social totality that determines even our capacity for sensible experience. There is a clear and comprehensive understanding of Adorno here, and anyone with an interest in the Frankfurt School has something to learn from it. One of the lasting takeaways is that the various dimensions of Adorno’s work are all part of a single – albeit necessarily fragmented – project.

This work is productive, too, for the questions and perplexities it raises. A particular question it raised for this reviewer was how we ought to conceive the interplay between the social relations of neoliberalism and the theoretical forms of consciousness coinciding with these relations. This difficulty was particularly pronounced in the chapter on neoliberal reason, where it seemed at some points that the liquidation of the subject through the computational theory of mind is conditioned by this subject’s liquidation by capitalist social relations (‘Subjects see themselves reflected in machines because they have ceased to be subjects’), and at other points that the conditioning relationship goes the other way (‘Springing from the fear of society’s total instrumentalization, the functionalist theory of mind reified cognition in anticipation of its real liquidation by the social process’ [131]). In this case, it might have been helpful to have devoted more time in the earlier chapters to a discussion of Adorno’s conception of emphatic truth, according to which we might recognize that critical theory as a reflection of a negative totality must do without the unambiguous conditioning relationships suggested by these formulations, but must nevertheless still express itself in these terms due to their ability to shake subjects out of their complacent acceptance of the illusions of capitalist reality.

A more substantive concern lies in the book’s selection of representatives of the theoretical expressions of neoliberalism, particularly the emphasis on Hayek’s economic theory and the computationalist theory of mind. While Prusik does not offer a detailed reconstruction of the history of positivism’s development into contemporary ‘Anglo-American’ approaches to

philosophy of mind (131), we surely cannot expect such a far-reaching philosophical work to follow every lead of this kind. In this case, however, a bit more of a fine-grained account could have been useful. In this connection, more attention could be given to the philosophical history of pragmatism, as well as the way in which broader tendencies in social research sharing its orientation toward methodological questions gained dominance through a Cold War transformation of social science research. With this kind of attention, what Prusik means by ‘computational theory of mind’ (5) might be broadened to name a more general approach to questions in social research characterized, for example, by a deflationary rejection of metaphysical questions and a related limitation of the concepts and methods of the social sciences. More consistent emphasis on the complexity of this history might be helpful, since it would allow us to better understand how the problems outlined in the fourth chapter’s treatment of neoliberal theories of mind apply even to those projects that reject computationalism but retain these broader commitments. This choice of historical focus additionally misses a chance to reflect on the problematic character of neoliberal theorizing beyond its distinctive statement in Hayek. Beyond their effects on card-carrying members of the Mont Pèlerin Society, do the illusory forms of consciousness specific to our negative social totality express themselves in ‘critical’ approaches to social and economic thought today? Is there a basis, therefore, to more substantively criticize the numerous yet distinct critiques of neoliberalism mentioned briefly by Prusik at the outset? Are there other projects of critical theory – for instance, those embracing pragmatism, or rejecting the critique of political economy – which we might be more inclined to reject, in accepting Adorno’s project?

In many ways, these questions belong less to Prusik’s work than to the current moment. It is to Prusik’s credit that he has provided a strong reading of Adorno’s critical theory – and a clear exposition of its fundamental relationship to the Marxist critique of political economy – from which these sorts of difficulty might now be approached. Contemporary scholars of the Frankfurt School, Marxist political economy and the history and current experience of neoliberal capitalism would benefit from the philosophical account developed here.