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## Review

# A political economy of the senses: Neoliberalism, reification, critique

Anita Chari

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Anita Chari's book is one of the most ambitious attempts to radicalize the concept of critique in the context of Marxist theory. It does so by elaborating on the connections between concepts that are usually discarded in current debates in critical theory, like reification, dialectics and immanence. In order to accomplish this, the author says that she will use the 'notion of a political economy of the senses' through which she will 'propose a form of critique that joins an analysis of the abstract dynamics of political economy and of capital accumulation with an understanding of the experiential and aesthetic dimensions of neoliberal society' (p. 4). Her goal is to reconstruct the notion of reification, since 'reification critique' enables 'thinking about the micropolitical dimensions of capital – the quotidian practices that ... challenge the capitalist way of life' (p. 7).

The book consists of seven chapters. Chapter one explores how '[n]eoliberalism has inverted the liberal relationship between the state and the economy' (p. 8) by focusing on the concept of depoliticization. In chapter two, Chari develops the argument that 'Honneth's engagements with the paradoxes of neoliberalism neglect the crucial connection between intersubjectivity and forms of capitalist production' (p. 65). In chapter three, she discusses Marx's theory of reification, and in chapter four she elaborates on Lukacs's theory of reification. Chapter five explores Adorno's critique of reification. In chapter six, Chari looks at artworks that make a practical use of the critique of reification (pp. 12–13). The seventh and last chapters explore recent forms of neoliberal protest critically.

Chari is correct to criticize 'radical democratic theorists', such as Laclau, Mouffe, Rancière or Honneth, for 'asserting the autonomy of politics from the economy as an axiomatic property of politics' (p. 47). For Chari, they are thus led to 'formalist conceptions of politics' and so 'reproduce the separation of economics and politics' (p. 47) endorsed by neoliberalism. She also includes in her criticism Habermas's theory, since he separates the 'intersubjective realm of the reified



lifeworld from the denormativized sphere of systematic rationalization...without recognizing...that the normativity of the lifeworld is materially constituted' (p. 75).

However, Chari does not analyse the relation between Habermas's understanding of reification and dialectics and Marx's, nor the early Frankfurt School theory's understanding of the terms. She does not explain the role of materialistic critique and its connection to reification critique in Marx's work. Bearing in mind the confessed Marxist origins of her thinking, this is striking. Marx stated that 'true materialism' makes 'the social relationship of "man to man" the basic principle of the theory' (Marx, 1975, p. 328). The best summary of the Marxian version of materialism probably lies in the eighth thesis on Feuerbach: 'All social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice' (Marx, 1976, p. 5). On this basis, demystification and dereification presuppose an analysis of how ordinary people produce reified forms such as the state, or value as money, through their alienated labour. Unfortunately this is not done by Chari.

In addition, Chari's interpretation of Marx is highly problematic. She maintains that

According to Marx, the commodity fetish disguises (or mystifies) the relation between humans as relationship between things. Yet, from the perspective of Marxism, the fetish has a real social existence and is therefore immune to a purely political reading. The incompatibility of these two approaches raises difficult questions about ... a robust critique of capitalism (p. 92).

Unfortunately, like many researchers, she discards Marx's separation between appearance and essence (Marx, 1998, p. 804; Marx, 1996, p. 537). The significance of this, as also stressed before in regard to materialism, is that Chari does not consider how ordinary people, in their everyday living (essence), create forms (appearance) like the state or the bourgeois parliamentary system that they feel estranged from. Had she done this, as she should, the focus of her research would have been shifted to the possible connection between alienation in everyday life and state policy or the process of social change. Also, she would not have concluded that Marx's critique of alienation led him to embrace the 'capitalist depoliticization' that is 'the bracketing of the political from the economic' (p. 105). She would have read Marx as someone who focused on how fetishism and reification are created by irrationality in everyday life.

Regarding Lukács, Chari maintains that he puts 'emphasis on self-reflexivity and on treating reification as ultimately a problem of knowledge'. This results 'in a merely cognitive critique of reification that is ultimately inadequate for theorizing forms of dereified praxis' (p. 141). She is not suspicious at all of the fact that, in Lukács, fetishism and alienated labour are not connected with state theory and the party through a dialectic between appearance/form and essence/content. Conversely, I hold that the problem with reification in Lukács is not that it is cognitive



but that it does not contain the contradictions caused by estranged labour. The implications are again that Chari ignores how ordinary people themselves built the bars of their prison. In their effort to sustain a livelihood they produce, through their alienated abstract labour, a contradictory world, the social relation of capital, which finally enslaves them.

In relation to Adorno, Chari asserts that ‘the stumbling block of Adorno’s theory is the opposition that Adorno creates between reified practice and reified experience’ and that his ‘polarization of dereified experience and praxis discounts the capacity of human beings for collective action’ (p. 160). In contrast, she needs to consider the view that Adorno interprets bourgeois culture – that is, the logic of the capitalist mode of production – according to the logic of the ‘enchanted, perverted, topsyturvy world’ analysed in the third volume of *Capital* (Marx, 1998, p. 817). Adorno confesses that his and Horkheimer’s philosophy is concerned with the ‘concept of the spell and all its implications’ (Adorno, 2006, p. 173). Adorno’s spell-bound society cannot be understood unless it is directly connected with Marx’s ‘enchanted’ world. Unfortunately, Chari reaches her conclusions about Adorno without taking into consideration points of his work where he cites Marx directly, such as his lectures on sociology, hence his idea that ‘society remains class struggle’ (Adorno, 1969, p. 149). She should consider studies that bring to the fore Adorno’s social impact (e.g. Holloway, 2010; Holloway, Metamoros and Tischler, 2009).

In the last chapter, Chari engages in a discussion with the Occupy movement and concludes that in order for us as critical theorists not to fall into the trap of a ‘stratified distinction between the economy and politics’, we must ‘fluidly attune our approaches to the movements of praxis in its various forms’ (pp. 201, 216). This is empty moralizing. I am sure that many liberal/bourgeois theorists, or traditional ones in Horkheimer’s term, would not object at all to this idea. Chari fails to clarify what exactly we should react against if we consider that fetishism and reification are created by us and that (as Marx and the early Frankfurt school insist) capital is not something outside of us since we are the capital. Consequently, she also does not succeed in connecting the immanent critique she sees in Adorno (p. 147) with Adorno’s (1973, p. 346) idea that ‘totality...is produced in the spellbound subjects’ and with capital. I hold that the thorny issue regarding an elaborated reflection on praxis is to what extent this concept carries the inherent contradictions and irrationality in capitalism and how they are connected to an analysis of the ‘abstract dynamics of political economy and capital accumulation’ mentioned by Chari.

In conclusion, Chari’s book should be welcomed as one of the very few efforts in the field of political theory to connect up concepts such as reification, dialectics, immanence and depoliticization, which are sidestepped by the current literature in critical theory. Despite the fact that she remains in the context of the traditional theory she criticizes, researchers of critical theory should engage with her argument in order to enrich their own.



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