

The compilation of texts under the title *Capitalism, Alienation and Critique: Studies in Economy and Dialectics* is Volume one of a trilogy named *Dialectics, Deontology and Democracy* by Asger Sørensen. The collection is a child of its time: ambivalently modest and dashing when stating its aim, it scratches the surface of vital questions about human prospects impregnated in a global capitalist system and goes in-depth at others in the same class of issues, offering both less and more than what one might expect under certain headings.

The volume includes seven main Chapters divided in two parts (i.e. Economy and Dialectics) and throughout comes back to the initial argument that dialectics, deontology and democracy are “obligatory and necessary ways of relating to social reality” (p.11). Notwithstanding that ‘necessity’ arguments invoke primarily the necessity of immediate syllogistic precision, the exploration is generally done without being oblivious to the need to question various claims on ‘validity’ or to think of (social) science as a political practice. The included name index with bibliography and a separate subject index could well serve students stepping into the world of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, getting inspired by the Hegelian dialectical nuances of *Aufhebung*, or discovering briefly Durkheim’s sociological conception of value as a way to situate persistent to this day realities, in which liberal politics ‘liberate’ the economic decision-making from moral reasoning.

An *Interlude* considers the potency of the classical Critical Theory and its current relevance, whereas the work concludes with a *Postscript* where the critique of political economy is continued from the first part and refreshingly deepened. This last and closing section in fact abounds with solid critique of several layers of capitalist ideology and is perhaps what one might prefer to read precisely in the first part dedicated to Economics, rather than an analysis of George Bataille’s quasi-political and neo-gnostic flow-of-energy concept on general economy in a macro- and micro- perspective.

The second part dedicated to Dialectics has a low start. Its beginning chapter dedicates only few lines to summarizing Aristotle’s contribution to the topic. The point is not that there is no mention of *Topika* or *Analitika protera* or that relevant works from Aristotle’s deeply political *anthropoeia philosophia* are, as if, footnoted (and briefly abstracted in other chapters), but that in the volume’s Introduction, the author summarizes this Chapter as the one where “dialectics is presented in a very classical philosophical way, i.e. taking it all the way from Plato and Aristotle to Hegel and Marx [...]” (p.14). A careful reader (or simply a radical one in the sense of going back to the *original* ancient text in the spirit of the Hegelian *Bildung* tradition) can arrive to Aristotle’s dialectics either through his logic and the understanding of dialectic premises, or his *Metaphysics* and the theory of *ousia*. At least,

this is what one would expect from a classical philosophical treatment.

Hence, the reader gets the impression that Aristotle somehow falls under the '*et al.*' category, which the author uses throughout the entire volume. No matter how playfully or only practically intended, the '*et al.*' practice is at points inadmissible for arguments' sake, opening up with no need a dismissive context which inadvertently goes against the author's own hailing of credible normative frameworks and emancipatory politics. At times the usage is outright obdurate as in "[...] and the discovery of Auschwitz *et al.* [...]" (p.49). In any case, even if the promised classical treatment is missing as a simple consequence of preference or choice of focus, we should be mindful that these themselves might be due to a long tradition of 'readings' of Aristotle which sometimes impoverish dizzyingly (Kant), adapt fecundly (Hegel) or appropriate catachrestically (Heidegger) Aristotle's potent theoretical system and dialectic approach.

In this sense, by being too eager to 'move on' in his argumentation at points too quickly, Sørensen risks being not radical enough in the most necessary sense, the political one. Leaving unmined treasures of insights and knots that could have been brought to light is evidenced also when the dynamic of lotteries, gambling halls, internet scams and casinos is put under the umbrella of 'ideology of hope' (p.290), without mining one's own or contextual *anthropological* assumptions as crucial for giving a consistently critical perspective. The work itself, for instance, is seen as seeking to contribute to the establishment "of credible normative frameworks enabling us to comprehend conceptually, and hopefully also to cope with, the current human predicament, while remaining painfully aware that such an ambition may in fact be overly presumptuous" (p.20). Perhaps claiming an aim only to give it up rhetorically in the same assertion might be attractive to a certain readership, but some might see the claimed scope as complacent and missing any substantial ethico-political challenge. Moreover, even though Sørensen is afraid that Honneth's critique might be politically impotent "due to its very radicality" (p.12), the reader might wonder what in particular is radical in reducing Critical Theory to social philosophy, given also the well-presented argument on Honneth's approach in light of the classical critical project (p.67-82).

Imprecision, inaccuracies, and possible contradictions are thus somewhat burdensome, even though the volume is not lacking in solid demonstrations; among else, into how the ever-growing mathematization of political economy is covering up its deeply ideological violence, which leaves out the problem of social (and political) justice. Nonetheless, the claim that an apolitical relation to social reality fails to recognize the value of all intermediary institutions, since it subscribes to the idea of a single individual facing the absolute (p.122), is potentially ideological itself *if left unpacked*, despite one's otherwise evident dedication to the critical

project. The fact that Durkheim's or our current intermediary institutions would condition an answer to relevant questions, or aim to eliminate the challenging ethico-political questions altogether, does not cancel or salvage us from the human condition and facing 'the absolute' whose historical trajectory, from *God* to *State* to *Market*, is only a potent soil to *plough into* critically.

The collection is therefore a good reminder of a struggle. A struggle of weakened States embedded in the new practices of imperialism and fragmented by the cynical ideology of global capitalism, which relies on the displaced likelihood that once something happens, it can be quickly renormalized as already having been possible. Examples abound, but think of a recent one: the imposition of a European State onto a non-European one to change its name even in its relation to all other states, against the clear will of the only sovereign (i.e., the people) and through an openly illegal and anti-constitutional process, but such that the first (politically) demarcates the (ethnic) identity of the 'Other' by claiming exclusivity over cultural history and even symbols. It is such political violence *par excellence* that defines our current world, alongside the direct one and the one that counts several millions of people as nothing, for they are neither consumers nor employees. But, if we do not see that *all three* orders of violence sit in the lap of greed, force and 'this is mine' ideology so typical of capitalism, we have understood nothing of its nature.

Hence, if our aim is effective change of the conditions currently guiding people's lives, the grand problem might not even be how do we system-wise sustain such change and reach those that are most in need of justice and equality. Badiou has already addressed this question elsewhere. Rather, are we aware that an 'all-inclusive' proletarianization is *already* underway? Such that we are *all* (beyond the classical image of proletarians) potentially stripped of our substance? We could, at least potentially, imagine a rich rather than a meagre *symbolic* life offered to newborns brought to a world of biogenetic manipulation (geared, likely, out of any democratic oversight) and threatening ecological breakdown, coupled exponentially with freedom reconfigured as being able to follow one's whims: yet lo and behold, our political problem is deeply ethical. It reconfigures for each of us the quintessential question of what do you believe in and hope for, and *how* do you live in the name of it.

There was a reason why Marx was concerned with raising the awareness of the working class and the need for unity in making a change that will indeed not be in the interest of the few only, and why education is such a potent 'game-changer', or why for that matter Hegel was obsessed with *Bildung* in line with the tradition of the classical Athenian *polis*, and his view that critique presupposes alienation. Potentially excluded from our very substance, each-of-us a *Homo Sacer* might be the only proper conceptual start.

Asger Sørensen, *Capitalism, Alienation and Critique: Studies in Economy and Dialectics* (Leiden: Brill, 2019)

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