

# Marxism and Education: Fragility, Crisis, Critique

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**Abstract:** The article rests substantially on the work of John Holloway, especially his early articles in *Common Sense: Journal of the Edinburgh Conference of Socialist Economists*. On this foundation, it is argued, firstly, that the importance of Marxism resides in its capacity to pinpoint fragilities and weaknesses in the constitution, development and rule of capital in contemporary society. Understanding these fragilities sharpens the critical edge of any movements aimed at social transformation out of the madhouse of capital.

**Keywords:** Marxism. Education. Crisis.

## Introduction

Why Marxism? And, specifically: Why Marxist educational theory? Through exploring these questions in this article it is concluded that Marxism is significant as it intellectually disrupts and challenges capitalist society, mainstream social science and capital's educational forms. The article is premised on leaving capitalism behind on the basis of a more fully developed communism that currently supports capitalist social life.

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resides in its capacity to pinpoint fragilities and weaknesses in the constitution, development and rule of capital in contemporary society. Understanding these fragilities sharpens the critical edge of any movements aimed at social transformation out of the madhouse of capital. Marxist educational theory plays a central role in this enterprise, and therefore justifies its intellectual priority.

These points are illustrated through consideration of the following ideas and phenomena: fragility, crisis, and critique. It is argued that fragility must be the starting point as Marxism is primarily a theory of capital's weaknesses, and not the opposite: a theory of capitalist domination. Following Holloway, Marxism is a theory *against society*, rather than just another theory *of society*. Our strength vis-à-vis capital is also the place for apprehending the fragilities and dependencies of labour. This vicious duality also exists in terms of crises in capitalism, and this flows into the phenomena of critique, and into the subjects / objects of critique, too.

The general view in this paper is that capitalism – a crisis-ridden, flawed, restless, unforgiving and desperate form of society – needs to be put into the dustbin of history, so that we can do more of what we want to do, in a more secure social and physical environment that allows the fullest expression of our abilities and passions, our creative instincts and positive feelings for others and ourselves. This is the embrace of communism.

### *Fragility*

The social condition of labour can be presented as being one of *fragility*. At any point, capital and its human representatives (CEOs, managers, human resource departments and so on) can outsource our work, downsize the labour force at our place of employment, or fly off to the Far East and the prospects of a

cheaper labour force. As unemployed folk, we appear to be at the mercy of the capitalist state and its paltry (if applicable) unemployment ‘benefits’, categorised as ‘shirkers’ in the right-wing press and forced to take looking for work as a pseudo full-time job, all the better to be exploited again for the social force that gets the major benefits of our labour: capital.

These contingencies and precarities of being a worker in capitalism today vary in format, intensity and detail as between nations. Yet the key issue is our apparent *social fragility*: capital appears to be so powerful, unforgiving and socially justified in its operations (it’s ‘the way things are’, and ‘there is no alternative’), and is backed up by the state, police, the courts, a scolding and finger-pointing media and running dog education system, that fragility by convention appears as our social lot. We still appeal to trade unions and political parties, and sometimes victories are gained, and our fragility momentarily dissolves into warm solidarity, comradeship and the euphoria of collective progressive change. Streets, squares and other spaces of resistance may become ours, for moments. But capital and its human representatives, its power, remain; on a global scale. Our fragility is reasserted. We cannot seem to shake it off: our precarious state of being returns, and is emphasised further when we glance at what capitalist development is doing to planet Earth. Furthermore, it seems we have to go on feeding the monster, for it appears that:

If we do not devote our lives to the labour that creates capital, we face poverty, even starvation, and often physical repression (Holloway, 2010, p.7).

Even when we articulate the fragilities of capital and resolve to attack these, intellectually and *practically*, this thought can at least make us cautious and often debilitate and paralyse. In attacking capital’s weak points we fear this may be creating tragic problems for ourselves.

Yet it is precisely because of these feelings and intuitions of our weakness in the face of the indefatigable and seemingly all-powerful monster that is capital,

that we need Marxism. We need it to expose the weak points, the vulnerabilities and *fragility of capital*. This is when Marxism comes to our aid. It helps us analytically locate and to *practically deepen* the weaknesses and fragilities of capital. For me, these are the principal arguments for engaging with Marxism today.

John Holloway came to similar conclusions nearly a quarter of a century ago. For, according to Holloway:

[...] while the other theories [e.g. feminism and Green theory] are theories of social domination or oppression, Marxism takes that oppression as its starting point. The question of Marxism is not: 'how do we understand social oppression?', but: 'given that we live in an oppressive society, how can we understand the *fragility of that oppression?*' (Holloway, 1994, p.39 – emphasis added).

Thus, although we experience multiple forms of oppression in capitalist society – racism, sexism and so on – understanding of the fragility of these forms of oppression, their foundations, and *disrupting* them, is crucial for advancing human progress.

The fragility of capitalism is based first and foremost on the fact that we, as labourers, continually *create* capital and its social formation; capital depends on our labour. Thus, notes Holloway (2015a), in effect *we are the crisis* of and for capital. 'We', are those who are excluded from the capitalist labour market and therefore relatively excluded from various markets for goods, and those whose labour-power is expended in a vast array of capitalist labour processes for the profit (literally) of capital, and also those engaged in the social reproduction of the magical commodity (for capital) that is labour-power (Garland, 2012, p.90). As social subjects 'we' are the 'restless movement of negation' (Holloway, 2009, p.7, in Garland, 2012, p.90). The 'social world is inherently fragile, without fixed and ultimate foundations' (Cordero, 2017, p.1), as 'we' never let these solidify on the one hand as we struggle against the imperatives and domination of capital, and representatives of capital continually seek to remake the force of capital in our

world through utilising our labour, intelligence and imagination, on the other. In a world of struggle, of course, we cannot ignore our own dependencies and weaknesses, but neither should we fail to seek out and exploit the fragilities of capital because of these.

It is when we move on to explore capitalist education, that we find an overwhelming rationale for embracing not just Marxist science in general but Marxist educational theory in particular. This is because Marxist educational theory exposes the perniciousness and horror of the role of educational institutions in capitalist society, whilst also unfolding the most general and serious weakness of capital. Labour-power, our capacity to labour, a commodity that is bought and sold in the capitalist labour market, and which is owned by labourers and periodically used by capitalist enterprises for generating surplus value, is *internal* to personhoods in capitalist society. The generation of capital as more capital, its new life as surplus value, rests on the unique, magical commodity that is labour-power: the only commodity that creates more value than is represented by its continued existence in capitalist society. That this precious commodity resides within the persons of labourers in capitalist society is most inconvenient for capital and its human representatives! Labourers must be forced, cajoled, incentivised and persuaded to expend their wondrous commodity in capitalist labour processes to produce more value than is expressed in the wage – to produce surplus value, on which capital's expansion and development depends.

In contemporary capitalist society and especially in the most developed capitalist countries in Europe and America since the Second World War, but today pretty much world-wide, education and training institutions have become increasingly involved in the *social production of labour-power* (see Rikowski 2002a, pp.131-135, and Rikowski 2002b, pp.193-196 for more on this). Marxism is the most advanced theory for understanding and resisting the processes involved in the social production of labour-power that we have today. It is best placed to understand and critique such siren educational policies such as

‘employability’ and apparently ‘progressive’ ideas such as ‘lifelong learning’ which can be read as lifelong labour-power production.

Furthermore, viewing the role of educational institutions in the social production of labour-power through Marxism indicates the real *social power of teachers* in contemporary society. They have a crucial input into the development of the unique commodity, labour-power, that the generation and expansion of capital through surplus value production is founded on. If labour-power is the fuel for the living fire (i.e. labour) then teachers can be viewed as guardians of the flame, or angels of the fuel dump – with all the power for subversion, fostering alternative visions of society, stimulating hope and the capacity for critique amongst students that human representatives of capital dread.

### *Crisis*

Marxism is the most powerful theory of crisis we have today, and for me this is another reason for engaging with Marx and Marxist theory. Crisis in capitalism exposes fragilities in the existence and rule of capital – and this flows from an interest in uncovering the weaknesses of capital in the previous section of this article. Crises in capitalism indicate ‘the power of labour in-against-and-beyond capital’, and ‘crisis is the manifestation of that power and for that reason the central concept of Marxism’ (Holloway, 1991, p.77). Capitalist society is crisis-ridden, and ‘crisis is always with us because, for capital, *labour is a problem*’ (Endnotes Collective, 2010, p.4 – original emphasis), and it is ‘the presence of the power of labour within capital that makes it ineradicably crisis-ridden’ (Holloway, 1991, p.74). Crisis is ‘the *modus operandi* of capital’ (Screamin’ Alice, 2008, p.1).

This connects with the previous section: the ‘constant tendency to crisis’ indicates the instability and fragility of capitalism (Holloway, 1991, p.74) and is a manifestation of the power of labour to disrupt the flow of capitalist development

(Ibid.). Caffentzis argues that for Marx ‘crisis brings to the surface the truth of the capitalist system (2002, p.6); that it has vulnerabilities and an historical shelf life. As Frings notes: ‘Every crisis points towards the historical finitude of capitalism’ (2009, p.2); and ‘in crisis the impermanence of capitalism becomes clear’ (Holloway, 1987, p.55), for crises indicate ‘the “limit experiences” of capitalism, when the mortality of the system is felt’ (Midnight Notes Collective, 2009, p.2), and on this basis it is clear that crisis is at the ‘core of capitalism’ (Holloway, 1987, p.56; and 1992, p.147).

Marxism *is* a theory of crisis, a theory of the fragility of capitalism; it does not *have* a theory of crisis (Holloway, 1994, p.39-40). Thus, for those seeking not just to struggle against capitalism whilst also living within it, but to go *beyond* capitalism in intellectual endeavours and practical activities, then Marx’s theory, which is at its roots a theory of crisis, is invaluable.

But what constitutes a crisis? And ‘precisely what does it mean to speak of ‘crisis’?’ (Samman, 2011, p.4). Drawing on an account of crisis in Rikowski (2015, pp.5-9, and 2018, pp.9-10), etymologically the concept of ‘crisis’ comes from the Greek noun *krisis* – denoting some decision, choice or judgement being made (Peters, 2013, p.199), and the Greek verb *krino*, ‘meaning to cut, to select, to decide to judge – a root it shares with the term ‘criticism’” (Osborne, 2010, p.23). This outlook on crisis is often traced back to Hippocrates (1983), as doctors are charged with the responsibility of making correct decisions and choices regarding the health and well-being of patients. In turn, they are also responsible for correct diagnoses of diseases and ailments, and effective monitoring of the patient following medical intervention. The ‘crisis’ point in disease, for Hippocrates, is a *turning point* in the strength of a disease: when it becomes clear that the patient is either on the road to recovery, or faces death or at least severe debilitation (e.g. amputation of limbs). As Bill Dunn (2014) notes, invoking ‘crisis’ as starting point for social explanation means that recovery needs to be accounted for when this occurs.

John Holloway (1992), following Hippocrates, argues that 'crisis' designates:

A qualitative turning point, a break in the normal process of change, is a crisis. The original term 'crisis' is medical. In its original Greek meaning it referred to a *turning point* in an illness (p.145 – emphasis added).

The crisis point is that moment when death or recovery hangs in the balance. Holloway argues this approach to crisis as turning point can also be applied to social scientific and historical studies, and that:

... crisis does not simply refer to 'hard times', but to *turning points*. It directs attention to the discontinuities of history, to breaks in the path of development, ruptures in a pattern of movement, variations in the intensity of time. (1992, p.146 – emphasis added).

For Holloway (1992) the concept of crisis is an indispensable aid to understanding social and historical change. Crises can *recur*: a singular crisis can appear to have reached a positive turning point only to move into a negative direction later on. Thus, although '...crisis is a period of *intensified change* which may lead one way or the other' (Holloway, 1992, p.146 – emphasis added), there could be retrogression, a back-tracking and recurrence of the crisis.

From its medical roots the notion of crisis can be applied to social phenomena, processes and developments. To say that these are in a state of crisis is to designate a situation as involving 'imminent danger and high risk' (Gamble, 2009, p.39). This makes quick decisions necessary, often 'under pressure with very incomplete knowledge' which 'can lead to very different results' (Ibid.).

In her book, *Anti-Crisis* (2014), and in an earlier article (2011), Janet Roitman argues that 'crisis':

...is a primary enabling blind spot for the production of knowledge. Making that blind spot visible means asking questions about how we produce significance for ourselves (2011, p.3).

Crisis is a 'blind spot' because we cannot view or grasp it independently of the phenomena that appear to *constitute* a 'crisis'. Thinking about and through the concept of crisis becomes an enabling tool for the production of certain kinds of



knowledge, especially historical knowledge, although in her 2014 book Roitman illustrates its efficacy for social scientific analysis in general.

Roitman's analysis of crisis suggests that the idea of crisis refers to a phenomenon without a subject: crisis is merely an effect of a complex set of social conjunctures and trends, but has no subject of its own. The centripetal point of this social whirlpool is empty, a void. The eye of the social storm cannot be seen: *de facto* it is therefore without content. The Cambridge English Dictionary (CED) has two interesting definitions of 'blind spot' for our purposes. The first is that a blind spot is: 'an area that you are not able to see, especially the part a road you cannot see when you are driving, behind and slightly to one side of the car'. In this case, the viewer is unable to see part of the road, though arranging wing mirrors correctly would throw light on the blind spot – a point that was relevant when my car was hit by a French coach on the M1 motorway in July 1994! However it is the second CED definition that hits home, where a blind spot is: 'a subject that you find very difficult to understand at all, *sometimes because you are not willing to try*' (emphasis added). On the basis of this second definition, it could be argued that Roitman has simply not enquired what the social eye of the storm might be: she has not explored what the *subject of crisis* is, or could be, in good faith. 'What *exactly* is in crisis?' (Roitman, 2014, p.49 – original emphasis), she queries. Answering this question is pointless, notes Roitman:

The hasty assumption that some thing is in crisis induces an inevitable leap to abstraction because, as I indicated ...[previously] ... crisis, in itself cannot be located or observed as an object of first-order knowledge. (Ibid.).

Roitman, whilst ruling out that there could be an *object* of a particular crisis, does consider briefly whether there could be *subjects* of crises (Roitman, 2014, pp.65-70) that can be grasped. However, for Roitman, crisis situations can bring about certain experiences that do provide a central social content for crises. She notes that the economic crisis of 2007-09 occasioned a 'crisis of the neoliberal subject', as this crisis was impossible on the basis of neoliberal perspectives on economy and society – yet it happened – thereby generating a crisis of neoliberal

subjectivity, which people shared to varying degrees, with mainstream economists especially feeling the clash of their world view with the social reality of bank failures, credit crunches, mortgage defaults, evictions and the other phenomena constituting the 2007-09 scenario. But Roitman's view is that this re-centring misreads (and also the unfortunate people embroiled in the 2007-09 crisis misread) what happened, for:

[...] crisis is the unexamined point of departure for narration. It is a blind spot for the production of knowledge about what constitutes historical significance and about what constitutes social or historical meaning ... [Therefore] ... posited in this way, crisis is the point from which hermeneutics or anthropology begins: crisis is the means to access both "the social" and "experience" because it entails the disclosure of the constitutive conditions of human practice (2014, p.66).

Thus, crisis is a 'narrative category' (Roitman, 2014, p.70): the point at which a story, a narrative, begins regarding situations we take to be those of 'crisis'. The idea of crisis allows us to construct meanings and narratives about historical turning points and in these processes we are the 'subjects of times of crisis' (Roitman, 2014, p.66); the storytellers, the meaning-makers, are the *real subjects* of crises for Roitman.

Fortunately, Roitman's precepts and prolixity come after many others had previously advanced perceptible points to, and subjects of, crises. Turning to the notion of 'education crisis' briefly, the subjects of crisis have been, for example: state-financed public education (e.g. Sarup, 1982); education for its own sake (e.g. Furedi, 2009; Hodgson, Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2017); the learning society and lifelong learning (Wain, 2004), or the school system (Arendt, 1961). Thus, others have not succumbed to the second CED definition of 'blind spot' and have refused to avoid or evade putting forward a subject of education crisis.

In line with the project of locating the weaknesses and fragilities of capital's domination of our lives, as argued for previously, then the subject of crisis should be the most explosive, yet basic and corrosive subject of crisis imaginable: the *capital relation*, the social relation between labour and capital, sometimes referred

to as the class relation. This subject of crisis obliterates any 'blind spot', and can be observed throughout the capitalist social formation – not just in what is viewed as the 'economy', and especially not just at the point of production, in the capitalist labour process. Crises in the capital relation are central to capitalist development, as:

The history of capitalist society is the history of the reproduction of the capitalist class relation ... [And ] ... if we assume the reproduction of this relation is not inevitable, what is the possibility of its *non*-reproduction? For a brief moment the recent [2007-09] crisis perhaps seemed to present us with a glimpse of such non-reproduction (Endnotes Collective, 2010, p.3 – original emphasis).

As Holloway (1987) notes:

Capitalist crisis is a crisis of the capital relation. It is not a "recession" or a "downturn in the economy" although it may *appear* as such; it is a crisis of the relation between the ruling class and the exploited class (p.56 – emphasis added).

For Holloway, this is the 'fundamental point' that discussions of crisis typically avoid. Crises of capitalist domination are periodically thrown up as, adds Holloway, 'domination is never easy' and the dominated 'are alive and resist' (Ibid.). Crisis 'expresses the structural instability of capitalist social relations, the instability of the basic relation between capital and labour on which the society is based' (Holloway, 1992, p. 159); it is a 'crisis of the capital relation', that is 'made inevitable by the inherent contradictions of that relation' (Holloway, and Picciotto, 1977, p. 92). This is what crisis *is*: the capital relation is the *subject of crisis*. A theory of crisis is therefore a 'theory of the volatility of class relations' (Holloway, 1992, p.162). But while it is a theory of the breakdown of a pattern of accumulation (e.g. the period of neoliberal capitalist rule from the end of the Post-War boom) it is also about the 'reestablishment of class relations' founded on their restructuring *across* the social formation (with national and regional variations in strategies pursued). Thus, in a time of crisis, representatives of the capitalist class seek to restructure the capital relation in all of the institutions of society – including

education – in favour of capitalist development and attempts at stabilising capitalist rule. For Holloway, crisis is the result:

[...]not of the strength of the working class or of the labour movement, necessarily, but of the *strength of the general resistance to capital's drive* for an ever more profound subordination of humanity ... (2002, p.39 – emphasis added).

Nevertheless, overt class struggle (strikes, protests, sit-ins, workers taking over factories, sabotage etc.) is an indicator of a clear failure of representatives of capital to adequately subsume the wills of labourers, collective labour, under the yoke of the imperatives of capital. If a crisis in the capital relation explodes onto the streets and into factories and offices then this is a vital message to human representatives of capital, but they are also alarmed by everyday forms of resistance; for example, relative idleness, coasting, time-wasting (e.g. messing about on Facebook) and low-level forms of resistance that nevertheless when aggregated indicate capital's failure to adequately control the labour of workers (see Bolchover, 2005, and Paulsen, 2014 – for more on these issues). At particular times, the relation of domination 'comes under strain' and if this pressure becomes intense, *shows itself as crisis*, heralding dangers for capitalist vitality, and then the capital relation has to 'be restructured if capital is to remain in command' (Holloway, 1987, p.56).

### *Critique*

The idea of critique has taken a number of poundings in recent years. Bruno Latour flags up that critique has 'run out of steam' (2004) on the one hand, and on the other Richard Kilminster (2013) points to critique's overbearing strength and argues that, like a kind of intellectual Japanese knotweed, critique has choked off signs of human progress and the notion that there are things worth preserving and valuing in contemporary society. In short, Kilminster, coming at critique as a

sociologist, points to ‘unalloyed overcritique’ in contemporary social science where the contrast between society as it is (capitalism) and as it ought to be (communism) has become too great (2013, p.5). This leads to an imbalance in making judgements about contemporary society, downplaying its ‘achievements and benign compulsion’ (p.7).

Other sociologists have noted the ‘excessiveness’ of critique. For example, Bülent Diken (2015) splits critique into radical critique and the sociology of critique grounded in a ‘pragmatic sociology’ (p.923). Diken focuses largely on the latter, where critique ‘is that which enables us to contemplate our present condition in the prism of the possible’ (Ibid.), thereby placing limits on critique and corralling off the radical alternative. The sociology of critique focuses ‘on the transformations of capitalism’ (p.924), as opposed to seeking out its fragilities with a view to exacerbating them. Thus: the sociology of critique ‘reduces all critique to reformist critique’ (Diken, 2015, p.930; and Diken, 2012, p.159). When he comes to consider radical critique (only briefly, 2015, pp.930-932), Diken spends most of his keyboarding on how, in contemporary society, critiques of capitalism are absorbed into the social formation and spat out as new forms of accommodating people to the rule of capital. Furthermore, for Diken, radical critique is ‘utopian’ (Diken, 2012, p.172), which leads him to browse through various forms of utopia, and all this is set within a chapter called ‘Critique of critique of critique ...’ (2012, pp.153-165).

Much of what Diken has to say appears to be influenced by the work of Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2007) where critique seems futile, pointless, as capital’s capacity to absorb and incorporate critique, protest and resistance appears to be boundless. Social critique ‘has not seemed so helpless for a century as it has been for the last fifteen years’ according to Boltanski and Chiapello (2007, p.xxxv). For, as Boltanski and Chiapello see it:

Capitalism keeps going, and typically overcomes the crises it generates, by responding to “critique”, stealing the thunder of its critics by answering some of their challenges while diverting

attention from other grievances that are either left unremedied or exacerbated (Brick, 2009, p.2).

Taking a neo-Weberian tack, Boltanski and Chiapello argue that as the 'spirit' of capitalism constantly evolves and mutates then radical Left critics of capitalism need to keep innovating in their critical analyses. Thus, critique becomes a labour of Sisyphus, a treadmill process, forever trying to catch up with the cunning metamorphoses of capital, with traditions of anti-capitalism being constantly outmoded (Brick, 2009, p.6). Unsurprisingly, Boltanski's (2011) later analysis of critique indicates that he is approaching it through 'the concept of *social domination*' (p.1); that is, starting out from capital's domination over labour and labourers, whereas the opposite perspective, of exploring capital's weaknesses and fragilities through critique, was argued for earlier in this article.

Where critique is not futile, or useless for significantly impacting on and moving beyond the rule of capital, some argue that it is most certainly limited. The analyst should focus on the limits of critique (Felski, 2015), its effects on the subject or object of critique being too corrosive. For Felski, this is because critique manifests aggressiveness where the process of critique and the person undertaking it 'likes to have the last word' (2015, p.123). Critique is unpleasant! This is so even though, argues Felski, it is *secondary* to what is being critiqued: the centre of critique, what is being critiqued, is smothered by analysis. Because critique is negative (pp.127-134) it necessarily underplays any worth, merits, or beauty possessed by the phenomena being critiqued. The intellectuality of critique tends to cut out or undermine any emotional or moral responses to the subject or object of critique, hence narrowing the range of human expression (Felski, 2015, pp.134-140). Furthermore, as critique 'comes from below' (e.g. Marxism, critical theory) its historical failure to lead to emancipation causes *despair*. Additionally, as critique purports to speak for the oppressed and downtrodden, once it is taken up by academics and Left intellectuals, as it invariably is, its academisation triggers 'feelings of resentment' and complaints of 'being inaccessible', or is 'irrelevant to larger communities of the oppressed' (Felski, 2015, p.142). From such a

perspective on critique it is a short step to flying the flag of ‘postcritique’, which Felski unfurls with her collaborator Elizabeth Anker (in Anker and Felski, 2017).

The ‘critique of critique’ has found its way into educational theory and philosophy in recent years. Barbara Applebaum’s (2011) influential article consolidated a postcritique trend in the philosophy of education that had been hardening for some years. She follows Judith Butler’s idea of ‘suspending judgement’ (though not abolishing it altogether) in the process of critique (see Butler, 2001). For Applebaum, the main problem is to introduce judgement regarding a state of affairs once it has been suspended (2011, p.62). Rather than addressing this point, Applebaum makes a plea for Butlerian critique (with its suspension, and allied to poststructuralism) to be central to educating students about discourses that obscure issues regarding how they gain their knowledge and ‘who benefits from such practices’ (Ibid.).

More recently, there has been a related shift towards post-critical philosophy of education and post-critical pedagogy, with the work of Naomi Hodgson, Joris Vlieghe and Piotr Zamojski fanning the flames of post-critique in educational theory and practice (in Hodgson, Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2016, 2017a and b, and 2018). These post-critical educational theorists insist that the post-criticality of their *Manifesto* ‘is by no means an anti-critical position’ (2017b, p.17), but I remain unconvinced, for as Garland has noted, there are ‘multiple standpoints for critique’, but:

...‘post-critique’ is not one of them, seeking as it does to post-date the concept without contributing to its development, accepting existing society as ‘natural, inevitable and immutable’ (2017, p.1).

And at this point the ‘critique of critique of critique of the post-post critical’ (for education and everything else) is left behind, with a critique of this debilitating theoretical melange best reserved for future work.

To get back to one of the original questions: why Marxism? I would argue that a commitment to Marxism is justified in virtue of the *specific form* of critique that Marxism offers. Before explicating Marxism’s powerful critique, a few

preliminary points. First, as Roitman (2014) has argued, crisis and critique are ‘cognates’: etymologically these two concepts have a common origin, they are like conceptual ‘blood relatives’ (see Boland, 2013, p.231 on this point). As Fornäs (2013) has pointed out, the idea of critique derives ultimately from the Greek *kritikos* which is concerned with making judgements, deciding right from wrong, what is the case is separated from what is not (p.505). This has some overlap with the Greek origins of the concept of crisis, as illustrated earlier. Gürses notes that ‘as an adjective (*kritikos*) and a verb (*krenein*)’ these Greek roots indicate acts of ‘distinguishing, separating, deciding, judging, incriminating – and *contending*’ (2006, p.1 – original emphasis). Gürses goes on to show how critique has origins in medical terminology, as does the concept of crisis, which was indicated previously in this article.

Fornäs notes that from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries the notion of critique came to denote ‘a more general *fault-finding*, a negative objection to something’ (2013, pp.504-505 – original emphasis), which still has contemporary resonance. The concept of critique was then also used in relation to literary and artistic productions – which continued to the present day (Fornäs, 2013, p.505). It was Immanuel Kant that ‘generalised this aesthetic concept of critique’ which came to ‘signify *any* detailed analytical judgement based on ability of distinction, differentiation and discrimination’ (Ibid. – emphasis added). In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Marx in particular took up the sword of critique to political economy and the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory waved it in the direction of cultural analysis in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The idea of critique grew in strength in all the social sciences, arts and humanities from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Having explored some aspects of the contemporary challenges to, and origins of, the idea of critique then a return to generating the specific form of critique I referred to earlier in this section can now begin. Marxism, for me, does not just have a theory of critique, but *is* a theory of critique: it lives and breathes critique; it is a deeply radical critique as it gets to us, to labour and labourers (the



radical roots). It demonstrates how our labour is at the base of the concepts and ideas that express capital's domination, the real abstractions and the processes they represent and express which we seek to undermine and make weaker, more fragile. As Foucault notes 'critique is a matter of making things more fragile' (2007, p.138), and Marxism is the most powerful theory we have for this enterprise. As John Holloway argues:

[...] the focus on the fragility of capitalism points in the direction of exploiting that fragility now, opening up cracks in the texture of domination wherever we can (2005, p.273).

There are three main ways of doing this. First, there can be spaces opened up within the belly of the beast, within capital's social universe: alternatives, practical initiatives that seek to clash against the rule of capital and its abstractions, especially against abstract labour. These practical activities and initiatives seek not to just resist capitalist social life (that is, being *against* capital) but also to constitute themselves as attempts to go *beyond* it. Secondly, the communist impulse can be nurtured within existing capitalist society. That is, how we relate to each other differently, forging stronger social relations based on an already existing communism-within-capitalism; strengthening the social relations of the future by making them stronger today. For Holloway, 'capitalism is pregnant with communism' (2005, p.271). Thirdly, critique within Marxism is an *intellectual attack* on capitalism; opening up conceptual fragilities, metaphorically jumping on the weak points of capital, and shouting about these from the rooftops! This third point concerns us here.

Yes, but the commodity, value, and abstract labour: how do we exorcise *these* from our social lives? How do we cut these monsters down to size and then consign their shattered bodies to the waste disposal unit? Marxist critique provides the necessary intellectual machinery. Marxism is a theoretical Large Hadron Collider that splits apart the hard, resistant ideas giving form to capital's social universe. In turning on the power for the atomic accelerator we engineer the fragmentation of capital's concepts which appear as 'crystallizations of the way in

which social relations are historically organized' (Cordero, 2017, p.8). As Neary makes clear:

It is only by fixing these categories, or real abstractions, in their actual social substance that they can be disabled of their social power and stripped of their authority (2017, p.561).

We shatter the crystalline ideas that hold capital together, to reveal ourselves once the dust has settled; ourselves as the real doers, the organisers and creators of a massive social force that oppresses us. The 'critical interrogation of the social substance of capitalist categories' (Moraitis and Copley, 2017, p.99, referring to Marx, 1867, p.174) is the object of Marxist critique.

Rita Felski notes, disapprovingly: '*Crrritique!* The word flies off the tongue like a weapon, emitting a rapid guttural burst of machine-gun-fire' (2015, p.120); but Marxism goes nuclear with critique, and does not mess with machine-guns or pea shooters. We have a social universe to intellectually conquer, and another to build – simultaneously! We need a dissolution weapon with the power of Marxist critique! Marxism as the ultimate intellectual weapon splits open capital's frozen stiff categories to show the power of human action in all its magical wildness, for:

Take a category, split it open. What do we see? Perhaps more categories. Take the commodity, for example, as Marx did. Split it open and we discover the antagonistic unity of value and use value (Holloway 2012, p.515) ... [And] ... Take a category, split it open and what we discover is not a philosophical contradiction but a living antagonism, a constant struggle, a clash of opposing movings (p.517).

While this particular splitting process yields the tension, the violent relation between value (grounded in abstract labour) and use value (expressed in commodities), the critique is not radical, does not get to the root of the matter. As Holloway argues:

But that is not enough. We need to go to the core, we need to go *ad hominem* (as Marx insists). We need to reach an understanding of the category in terms of human action, going through layer after layer of conceptualization if necessary. Why? Because it is only if we understand the social world in terms of human action that we can pose clearly the questions of *what human action is necessary to change it* (2012, p.515 – emphasis added).

Thus, critique drives on until the human content of the categories we are shattering is uncovered; it is crucial to show how we (as labour and labourers) create and generate capital's social forms that come to stand against us as ghostly but real abstractions that rule our lives. Critique, then, in this sense, is not just an academic exercise interrogating discourse, for exposing inconsistencies, contradictions, aporias, or maleficent values lurking under expressions of seemingly positive virtues. It aims to uncover what humans do in capitalist society, what exists underneath the concepts and abstractions that give capital its substance and coherence – in order to do different, to communise. The starting point for this is to critique 'unreflected presuppositions' incorporated in concepts with social validity in capitalist society, such as 'commodity', 'value' and 'labour', in order to uncover how these constituted forms 'are forms of human social practice' (Bonefeld, 2005, p.1), in order to show how we create, nurture and maintain these social forms, how we keep on making capitalism, as a guide to how we might generate alternative social relations and different ways of doing. Thus, Marxist critique is a theory of social constitution, how capitalist forms are generated and maintained; how capitalism is socially constituted – with 'us' at the terminus of capitalism and its unravelling. Marx's critique, and Marxist critique, 'has to show the human content, however perverted and debased, of the constitutional forms of capital ... for there is no form without content' (Bonefeld, 2005, p.2).

The 'critique of forms' (Holloway, 2001, p.66) uncovers the antagonistic social relations constituting them but we also see ourselves as the 'negated subject' (Ibid.), for:

Capital depends on the doing which it denies: therein lies the force of hope which exists in the mode of being denied, therein lies hope (Holloway, 2001, p.68).

Our mode of existence might be denied in capital's social universe, but we are always there; capital cannot shake us off, and more to the point is dependent on our labour for its existence. Marx's *Capital* is:

[...] a critique of the categories of political economy, but the same principles apply to a critique of religion, or politics, or sociology, or gender studies, or whatever: the question is always how do we understand the existence of the categories *ad hominem*, on the basis of the way in which human activity is organized (Holloway, 2012, p.516).

Of course, education could be added to Holloway's list of categories. However, there are a number of considerations here – that will be taken up in future work in more depth.

First, it is not clear what the *starting point* should be for a critique of capitalist education. For many years now, I have been interested in the question of what makes capitalist education *capitalist* education: what is the form that education takes in capitalist society? It seems to me that education in capitalist society is currently in the process of being *capitalised*; that is, becoming capital. Marx notes in the *Grundrisse* (1858) that, regarding capital, it is necessary to explore the 'conditions and presuppositions of the *becoming*, of the *arising*' of capital, and this presupposes 'precisely that it is not yet in being, but merely in *becoming* (p.459 – original emphases). This is all the more so for education as in many of the most developed capitalist countries the state plays a significant role in education today; education, in many institutions, has not been fully subsumed under the orbit of capital as value-generating activity. Holloway argues that in the critique of capitalism:

We take the commodity for the sake of familiarity, but we could have started anywhere (2012, p.516).

Thus: we could have started with education in capitalism on this basis. Yet later on in the same article Holloway argues that: 'In the centre of critique is the opening of the most important atom of all: *labour*' (2012, p.517 – emphasis added), and more recently Holloway has argued that 'wealth' (abundance, or richness) is the real starting point for analysis in Marx's *Capital*, on the basis of the opening sentence (as opposed to the commodity) (see Holloway, 2015b and 2017).

Eighteen years ago, I argued that the starting point for an understanding and critique of capitalist education was labour-power as a commodity (Rikowski,

2000). When Marx 'split the commodity' in *Capital* he got to value, exchange-value (as the form of appearance of value) and use-value, and further splits led to labour and thence to concrete and abstract labour. It seemed to me that uncovering labour-power as a commodity, or 'splitting' it in Holloway's terms would get me to the human content in its social production the social production of labour-power, where capitalist education plays a part (perhaps the main part) in the social production of labour-power, and the labour involved in the social production of labour-power would, therefore, form the human practices involved in this form of production. But further studies of commodity forms suggested I was at most half right: I had not considered capitalist education as a milieu for the formation of the general class of commodities (see Rikowski, 2000, pp.27-31) within educational institutions in contemporary capitalism. Work from 2001-2006 indicated that there were *two* starting points for the critique of capitalist education (for example, Rikowski 2001, 2003 and 2005); two commodity forms that opened up the concepts necessary for such a critique: labour-power (the unique value-creating commodity), and the general class of commodities. In the case of private for-profit schools and universities, these two commodity forms and their development work in tandem. Rikowski (2018) expands on these points.

### *Conclusion*

This article presupposes that we are committed to the termination and transcendence of capitalist society, including its educational forms as capitalist education. Therefore, Marxism in this light becomes a radical science that intellectually disrupts and ruptures capitalist society and its educational forms, whilst simultaneously creating alternative social arrangements that seek foundations within non-capitalist social relations, and this is inclusive of educational formations. In this light, Marxism is a theory *par excellence* for us as:

First, Marxism is the most fully developed theory adequate to the task of intellectually locating weaknesses in the rule of capital; *this is what Marxism can do better* and more comprehensively than any other theory. It is precisely because of our feelings of weakness in the face of capital that we need Marxism: it gives us the capacity to locate capital's fragilities however ferocious, aggressive and monolithic it appears. Specifically in relation to capitalist education, in contemporary society education is involved in the social production of labour-power: the single commodity that fuels the expansion of capital as it is transformed into labour in the capitalist labour process and produces new value, surplus-value. This is a massive vulnerability for capital, as we, *us labourers and potential labourers (e.g. students, the unemployed and the whole of the Reserve Army of Labour)* possess this magical commodity within our personhoods, yielding the source of our power, the power of labour, and the social power of teachers who have significant inputs into the social production of labour-power. Teachers have the capacity to subvert, to put in question the reduction of education to the social production of labour power. They can also devise alternative, co-operative forms of education where labour-power production for capital is critiqued and denigrated. For me, these considerations alone would be enough for embracing Marxism in general and Marxist educational theory in particular.

Secondly, Marxism is the most powerful theory of crisis we have today. Crisis in capitalism exposes fragilities in the existence and rule of capital, and for me this is crucial for us labourers, ourselves as labour, as capital is dependent on us yet we can free ourselves from it and survive and thrive through revelling in the communist impulse, the communising dance. This embrace of crisis includes grasping how crises in education can become *crises for capital* (Rikowski, 2018). Marxism *is* a theory of crisis; capitalist crises have at their centre capitalist social relations, and *these are the subject of capitalist crises*, and reveal a failure of capital to control labour adequately for its expansion and vitality.

Thirdly, Marxism is not just a theory of critique, a way of critiquing or some kind of methodology, it *is* critique. Marxism *is* critique; the relentless critique of ‘all that exists’ (Marx, 1843) in capitalist society. Because it dissolves all of capital’s social forms and phenomena in critique it can point the way towards the kinds of social life we can build when excluding capitalist social relations. We can build these new lives now, and we have done some of this work already as communism already exists as a suppressed form of life within capitalist society. We do not have to wait for the ‘right conditions’ to appear as they have been with us for some time! The critique of capital’s educational forms, especially its commodity-forms has hardly begun, but the work that has been done so far indicates that, if we are to create the kinds of educational forms that we say we want, then we have to develop alternatives to ‘education by the state’ – and these are beginning to emerge.

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