

Towards a Phenomenological Anthropology of the Capitalist World System

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One lineage in the history of anthropological theory is the discipline's struggle to connect the experiences and worldviews of individual humans to the arena of global political economy. Michael Schnegg's article offers an important step forward from the heavy reliance of recent theories on auxiliary concepts in bridging the subjective and the intersubjective. The globalization talk of the 1990s and 2000s pretended that the impact of the capitalist world-system on everyone and everything on the planet was a recent phenomenon. The focus on neoliberalism offered a more precise dating and analysis of capitalism's global cycle and its impact on subjectivities and intersubjectivities in the 2000s and 2010s. Yet again, the global scale of anthropology's analysis suffered from an ahistorical predicament, as there was little to no interest in understanding the continuities and discontinuities from previous cycles of accumulation in the neoliberal era (Neveling 2010).

Recent research on the history of anthropology has made the reasons for this predicament easily identifiable. The strongholds of anthropological knowledge production have for many decades been universities and research centres in the West European and North American core of the capitalist world-system. The political and economic praxis sustaining that core has been the (super-)exploitation of the planet in a colonial, imperial and postcolonial interstate system. Resistance and alternatives to capitalist exploitation have been violently quashed wherever subjects resisted on shopfloors, plantations, streets, parliaments and beyond. Marxist and other anti-capitalist teaching and research in those university departments that defined anthropology's canon led to bans from the profession in many cases. Often, it had to be conducted in clandestine ways. Leading figures in the discipline's mainstream instead made their career in alliances and with funding from predatory foundations and institutions of the US and other Western colonial and Cold-War capitalist regimes (Price 2016).

Many canonical texts in anthropology thus come with an early and unwitting variant of the key form in George Spencer Brown's famous *Laws of Cognition* (Spencer-Brown 1969). Spencer Brown designed this key form a 'Cross' and explains that it demarcates the boundary between the field of research and the outside – between the

object of study and what is outside (in Niklas Luhmann's system theory, for example). The 'Cross' of the anthropological canon has for decades demarcated the impact of the political economy of colonialism and capitalism on everyone as the 'outside' of the sphere of research. This is why, in recent years, Bruno Latour's contribution to so-called Actor Network Theory (ANT) has been the most popular variant in mainstream anthropology's denial of service (DoS) attack on critical political-economy approaches, especially Marxist anthropology (Neveling 2019). A key theme linking ANT with earlier anti-Marxist DoS (aMDoS) is the statement that critiques of the political economy of capitalism were 'woven out of the same tiny repertoire of already recognized forces: power, domination, exploitation, legitimization, fetishization, reification' (Latour 2005: 249 in Holifield 2009, 653). Leaving aside the question whether such a repertoire was 'tiny', one wonders why Latour called for new paradigms when existing Marxist paradigms in anthropology had powerfully criticized a world stuck in a downward spiral of capitalist exploitation, at the behest of then being excluded or side-lined from the profession. Rather, an anthropology confronting the challenges of global warming and capitalist upper-class warfare on everyone else is thus in need of thorough implementations based on advances of existing Marxist and anti-capitalist anthropological theories.

Michael Schnegg's overview and implementation of recent phenomenological approaches is an important and potentially path-breaking point of departure in anthropology because of its rigorous attention to the long-standing philosophical concepts undergirding phenomenological anthropology. Moving from the difference between Descartes and Husserl in the latter's insistence that 'mind and world are *relationally intertwined* in constituting what appears phenomenally' to the difference between Kant and Husserl in the latter's call to take philosophical enquiry 'back to the things themselves' (Schnegg 2023:62–3, his italics), Schnegg establishes a firm intersubjective paradigm. Winds, other meteorological phenomena and climate and ecology more generally are imbued not with the Kantian *a priori* that loiters on all nodes of the ANT paradigm's insistence on a flat ontological agency of things. Instead, in 'Phenomenological Approaches', what constitutes a given situation emerges from the *longue durée* of the relational intertwining of mind and world. Importantly, Schnegg salvages the 'situation' (p. 78) with reference to Waldenfels' *Antwortregistern* (answer registers) from the grips of Heidegger's frame that has humans cast into the world with the existential thread of being cast out lurking should the replica womb of the *Volk* no longer be 'at hand' (Kapfinger 2021).

Two important additions emerge from a close reading of Schnegg's work. First, it seems appropriate to develop a critical historical approach to phenomenology itself. Heidegger's philosophy may be less suited as a general theory of being, for example. However, it may become better suited if anthropology were to employ a sophisticated understanding of Heidegger's world-views to study the unfortunate and dangerous rise of neo-fascist movements all over the planet. Such a research project has been foreshadowed in recent work by Daniel Gyollai, who shows that a critical phenomenolo-

gy can identify how the racist turn in Hungarian state politics establishes structures of relevance in the wider society that then shape the racist treatment of refugees by Hungarian border guards (Gyollai 2022). Elsewhere Susanne Klien and I have shown how ethno-traditionalist and racist communities have world-views that are closely linked to Carl Schmitt's political theology and its rejection of an epochal shift with the world-historical transition to capitalism. Where Schmitt argued that twentieth-century nation states lacked political legitimacy and thus built their sovereignty solely on earlier sources of power, in an exchange of letters the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg argued that this denial of modernity as an era of new forms of political legitimacy, largely due to the transition to capitalism, led Schmitt to relate uncritically to German fascism. Thus, Schmitt's denial of an epochal shift with the onset of global capitalism and his insistence on a political theology is mirrored in contemporary political movements' insistence that contemporary political legitimacy was rooted in long-standing ethno-nationalist and racist political formations – ignoring the fact that those political formations have never existed in the way right-wing movements imagine them (Neveling and Klien 2010).

Second, building on this suggestion to research Schmitt's and Heidegger's own 'situations' in comparative historical perspective, it seems important to respond to Schnegg's call for a direct engagement with Karl Marx's writings in critical phenomenology to supplement the derivative Marxism from French existentialism. An obvious point of departure for such an endeavour is Marx's labour theory of value, which highlights that value in capitalism is not a thing in itself, an absolute derived from the *a priori* inputs of labour, capital and rents, as classical and neoclassical economic theories had it. Instead, value and capital are social relations shaped by forces and relations of production that enable capitalists to extract a surplus from proletarians that have nothing to sell but their labour. These insights are akin to Husserl's relational analytical approach as an alternative to Kantian philosophy, in which he calls for an analysis of how things appear in reality and how mind and world relate to one another (p. 63). To Marx, the value of labour is an abstraction of different labouring activities via the fetishes of commodities and money. The very fact that value exists as an economic category and is socially constructed is the result of a historical shift in the mode of production (Marx 1962). There may thus be more Marx in Husserl than is commonly assumed as both call for a return to a philosophical enquiry of the things themselves instead of a focus on their surface appearance.

Accordingly, Marx noted that human world-views and thought may change with changes in the relations and forces of production. The alienation of labour derives from a particular appearance of both things and social relations. Now, the question is how to bring together phenomenological anthropology in the spirit of Schnegg's treatise and Marxist anthropology's critique of political economy. The theoretical insights in Eric Wolf's book, *Envisioning Power*, are a good point of departure. For Wolf's theory of power incorporates a range of theories according to their most suitable scale of analysis. His model considers four dimensions; intersubjective power, or 'how persons enter into

a play of power' (Nietzsche); charismatic/interpersonal power, or 'the ability of an *ego* to impose its will in social action on an *alter*' (Weber); tactical and organizational power, or 'the instrumentalities through which individuals or groups direct or circumscribe the actions of others within determinate settings' (Gramsci); and structural power, which is 'manifest in relationships that not only operates within settings and domains but also organizes and orchestrates the settings themselves, and that specifies the direction and distribution of energy flows' (Foucault/Marx) (Wolf 1999:5, his italics).

Combining the analysis of the scales of power with the analysis of the scales of being and world-views, we can move forward with Schnegg's three concluding foci on phenomenology in anthropology as, first, a '*theory of experience*' (in lieu of the Nietzschean focus on the intersubjective scale in Wolf); second, 'an effective means of studying the *situationality* of knowing' (as informed by Marxist insights into the interplay of forces of production and relations of production as a macro-situation at a high intersubjectivity scale); and third, a theory for 'separating *how we know* from the context that frames experience' (as a 21st century extension of Marx's concept of fetishism; (Schnegg 2023:91, his italics).

References

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