

Antisemitism and Anti-Capitalism in the Current Economic Crisis

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the current crisis of the economic system, many critics of capitalism feel confirmed in their views. They include radical leftists, who have always known that capitalism does not work, mainstream politicians, who do not question capitalism as such but only its neoliberal outbursts, and right-wing groups, who want to strengthen national states against a frenetic global economy.

As important as it is to radically question the structures of our society, it can turn out to be dangerous if it is not done properly. The crucial word is “radically.” With its Latin origin *radix* (meaning “root”), in the field of social sciences it implies digging to the roots of social phenomena and thereby exposing and criticizing their foundations. Inspired by Karl Marx and his *Critique of Political Economy*, Theodor Adorno made this his life’s work in various fields, including philosophy, sociology, and musicology. Adorno was also aware of the dangers of radical critique:

Not everything that tends towards extremes in whatever dimension can be considered radical, but only what attacks the negative situation at the root in an “inconsiderate critique of the status quo.” (Adorno 2003: 92)

This is especially important in the field of economic critique, as a superficial analysis of the structures and processes in an economic system can lead to premature verdicts. Such verdicts are never able to push through the ideological undergrowth and, for reasons that I will discuss later, often produce antisemitic consequences — whether consciously or unconsciously.

The first part of this paper identifies the societal structures and historical tendencies that make it possible to blame “the Jews” for the problems of the capitalist system. This is followed by a case-study of an Austrian right-wing newspaper as proof of the ideas presented.

2. POLITICAL ECONOMY

Two aspects of Marx’s *Critique of Political Economy* are relevant to the various anti-semitism theories discussed in this paper, namely the process of surplus production and abstract domination.

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Marx starts his analysis of modern capitalist societies by analyzing the notion of commodity. This is surprising, as it would seem more obvious to start the examination with money. However, Marx realized that it is the commodity, not money, that is the basic unit of a capitalist economy and society. Money — the general equivalent — can then be deduced. Consequently, Marx's critique of the bourgeois society is not a critique of money alone but of the whole process of capitalist production. He shows that surplus value, or profit, is not produced in the circulation sphere by selling the commodity at a higher price than the price at which it was bought but that it is produced by the workers in the production sphere and only realized by the capitalist in the circulation sphere.

Another important point of Marx's critique of the political economy relates to the change in forms of domination. Whereas in the past there used to be a personal form of domination, such as the master-slave or landlord-bondsman relationship, in capitalism this domination has been transformed into an abstract form of domination. The members of modern societies are formally free, but unfortunately

free in the double sense, that as a free man he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that on the other hand he has no other commodity for sale, is short of everything necessary for the realization of his labour-power. (Marx 1995: 109)

3. ANTISEMITISM AND ANTI-CAPITALISM

Antisemitism has a strong affinity with anti-capitalism. From Shylock the reckless usurer, via the court Jew and Baron Rothschild, to the East Coast bankers, antisemites have frequently held the Jews responsible for the burdens of the (proto-)capitalistic society.¹ It is crucial for the understanding of antisemitism to be aware of this link and to interpret it correctly. First and foremost, it is important to comprehend that antisemitism has nothing to do with real-life Jews, their behavior, or their habits. As the German author Ulrich Enderwitz puts it:

antisemitic judgements are, because of their own structure, not reactions to real outer experience, but projections of an inner conflict, not the empirical product of a process of perception and cognition, but a symptomatic expression of a discrepancy and resistance within the perceiving and cognizing subject. (Enderwitz 1998: 11)

For Adorno and Horkheimer, this projection is an important point in their antisemitism theory.² In the third thesis of the "Elements of Anti-Semitism" in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they make a connection between antisemitism and capitalism: "Bourgeois antisemitism has a specific economic cause: the concealment of domination in production" (Horkheimer & Adorno 2004: 182). This is the connection to Marx and the transformation of domination. The Jews, because of their historic position within the European economic system, were scapegoats for discontent with capitalism. Since some Jews were involved in the circulation sphere, they were the visible elements of the

¹ For a comprehensive discussion of antisemitism and the Christian interest ban (*Zinsverbot*), see Heil & Wacker (1997).

² This is just one aspect of Adorno's and Horkheimer's thoughts on antisemitism. For an extensive summary, see Salzborn (2010: 96ff.). A helpful article on the various transformations of the antisemitism theory of the Frankfurt School is Martin Jay's *The Jews and the Frankfurt School. Critical Theory's Analysis of Anti-Semitism* (1980).

economic process. “[The Jewish merchant] is the bailiff for the whole system and shoulders the hatred for all the others” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2004: 183).

So we can see that blaming the Jews for the shortcomings of capitalism is an abbreviated critique of capitalist structures that stops at the sphere of circulation instead of going to the root of the problem, which is located in the sphere of production. It is a “conformist rebellion” (Claussen 2005) in which the antisemites can live out their thwarted ambitions without attacking the system as a whole or challenging the ruling class.

However, this failure to understand capitalist production is not just a subjective problem but is based within the structure of the society itself. “The responsibility of the circulation sphere for the exploitation is a societally necessary pretense.” (Horkheimer & Adorno 2004: 183) These necessities are strongly linked to such terms as fetish-character³ and ideology, which were used by Marx to describe capitalist society and were then employed by Moishe Postone, among others, to analyze antisemitism.

Postone’s understanding of the relationship between antisemitism and capitalism is a development of certain aspects of Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s theory. For him, the identification of the Jews with the circulation sphere was true in the case of traditional antisemitism but is no longer valid in the case of its modern form:

It is not that the Jews merely were considered to be the owners of money, as in traditional anti-Semitism, but that they were held responsible for economic crises and identified with the range of social restructuring and dislocation resulting from rapid industrialization. ... In other words, the abstract domination of capital, which—particularly with rapid industrialization—caught people up in a web of dynamic forces they could not understand, became perceived as the domination of International Jewry. (Postone 1980: 107)

Postone explains antisemitism by referring to Marx’s concept of the *fetish of the commodity*, understood as a

mysterious thing simply because in it the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. (Marx 1995: 43)

This means that the relation between humans expresses itself in an objectified form, rather than a social form, because of the fetishism and the double character (value and use-value) of the commodity form. Thus, the commodity expresses and veils social relations at the same time. The abstract foundations of capitalist organization are veiled, and what is left are the concrete, sensual forms.

One aspect of the fetish, then, is that capitalist social relations do not appear as such and, moreover, present themselves antinomically, as the opposition of the abstract and concrete. Because, additionally, both sides of the antinomy are objectified, each appears to be quasi-natural. The abstract dimension appears in the form of abstract, universal, “objective,” natural laws; the concrete dimension appears as pure “thingly” nature. (Postone 1980: 107)

³ For a longer discussion, see Grigat (2007) and Postone (1993).

This is the crucial point in Postone's theory. He thinks that modern antisemitism does not identify the Jews with the circulation sphere but rather with its other side: the abstract dimension of value as such.

When one examines the specific characteristics of the power attributed to the Jews by modern anti-Semitism — abstractness, intangibility, universality, mobility — it is striking that they are all characteristics of the value dimension of the social forms analyzed by Marx. Moreover, this dimension, like the supposed power of the Jews, does not appear as such, but always in the form of a material carrier, such as the commodity. (Postone 1980: 108)

The concrete dimension (labor, artisanry) can then be constructed as natural and ontologized as a constant and everlasting pillar of humanity. Antisemitism as an anti-capitalist outburst illegitimately separates the concrete and abstract dimension of capitalist society and focuses on agitating against this abstract dimension, against the money and financial capital personalized in international Jewry. In this fetishized perception, it is possible to pit honest manual labor against the exploitative, parasitic financial capital that biologizes capitalism.

The "anti-capitalist" attack, however, does not remain limited to the attack against abstraction. Even the abstract dimension also appears materially. On the level of the capital fetish, it is not only the concrete side of the antimony which is naturalized and biologized. The manifest abstract dimension is also biologized — as the Jews. ... Modern anti-Semitism involves a biologization of capitalism — which itself is only understood in terms of its manifest abstract dimension — as International Jewry. (Postone 1980: 112)

4. AUSTRIAN NEWSPAPER *DIE AULA*⁴

I have chosen *Die Aula* as a case study of how anti-capitalism and antisemitism are often linked for various reasons. First, it is not just some small publication but the monthly newspaper of an organization with very close ties to the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) (Gärtner 1993: 262ff) and a monthly circulation of 11,000 copies.⁵ The Freedom Party is a right-wing party that was established as the third party in post-war Austria and was more or less openly the party of the (former) Nazis. The Freedom Party became internationally infamous in the late 1980s and 1990s as the party of Jörg Haider (Bailer & Neugebauer 1993). It became part of the federal government in 2000 and five years later split into a pragmatic liberal-right party (BZÖ) and a hard-line right-wing party (FPÖ) (Luther 2006; Stephen Roth Institute 2005). The main topics of the FPÖ are currently immigrants, especially Muslims, and the neoliberal rulers in Brussels. However, anti-

⁴ I would like to thank Willi Lasek, Nedim Mujanović, and Heribert Schiedel of the Documentation Center of the Austrian Resistance (*Dokumentationsarchiv des österreichischen Widerstandes* — DÖW) for providing me with literature and copies of *Die Aula* and for helping me to contextualize this material within the Austrian extreme right scene.

⁵ *Die Aula* do not make official statements on their circulation. However, the ÖZV, the Austrian periodical newspaper association, provides this figure on its website, at: <<http://www.oezv.or.at>>. According to Heribert Schiedel, an expert on the Austrian right-wing and neo-Nazi scene, this figure appears to be accurate, as *Die Aula* claimed to have 9,000 subscribers in the 1990s.

semitism, in the past as well as in the present, is a constant topic of FPÖ politicians (Schiedel & Neugebauer 2002). The proportion of votes received by the Freedom Party varies significantly but seems to be stabilizing between 15 and 20 percent. It is therefore not just a marginalized group on the edge of the democratic spectrum.

The authors of *Die Aula* are sometimes FPÖ party members, like MEP Andreas Mölzer, but mostly people from the political environment of the Freedom Party: Nazi-romantics, neo-Nazis, Holocaust deniers, and German-national student fraternities (Gärtner 1996: 151-227). The main topics of *Die Aula* are the *Verbotsgesetz*, the “death” of the Austrian/German people due to “mass immigration” (*Überfremdung*), the general decline of art, culture, and civilization, the excesses of EU bureaucracy, “Usrael,” and the economic crisis. According to the Documentation Center of the Austrian Resistance (DÖW) *Die Aula* has moved increasingly toward neo-Nazism in recent years.⁶ Even though *Die Aula* sees itself as a newspaper of the political right, it has no problem supporting left-wing or Muslim politicians, as long as they follow a strict anti-Israel foreign policy. *Die Aula* therefore supports Hugo Chavez in his struggle against an alleged “Usrael” conspiracy, backs Iran’s President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in his support of radical Islamist groups and his pursuit of nuclear weapons, and acknowledges the “courage” of two MPs of the German leftist party *Die Linke* who refused to applaud Israel’s President Simon Peres after he delivered a speech in the German parliament.

For this paper, I have examined all issues of *Die Aula* from 2008, when the economic crisis became manifest with the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers, to May 2010. Many articles during this period dealt with antisemitic topics, such as the “witch-hunt” against the Holocaust-denying bishop Richard Williamson of the St. Pius Society and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In this paper, however, I will only deal with antisemitic statements concerning the economic crisis.

Die Aula dedicates a lot of its coverage to the economic crisis. It has published special issues on the crisis and crisis-related topics appear in nearly every issue.

The basis of the critique of capitalism in *Die Aula* is a fetishized understanding of how capitalism works, characterized by an inability to distinguish between the essence and manifestation of capitalist relations. Unable to comprehend the abstract domination of the value and internal antagonisms of capitalism, the newspaper’s contributors project these abstract societal processes onto the visible agents of these processes, namely the Jews. They imagine the Jews as the puppet masters of the modern economy who pull the strings behind the scenes to their own advantage. This picture of the puppet masters takes various forms, from subtle antisemitic codes to very explicit antisemitic phrases:

- “the globalists and their accomplices” (*Die Aula* 02/2008: 20);
- “worldwide oligarchic structures” (*Die Aula* 04/2008: 37);
- “jumping jacks of big money” (*Die Aula* 04/2010: 38);

⁶ The difference between the extreme right and neo-Nazism is that the former is allowed by law, whereas the latter is regarded as a crime against the *Verbotsgesetz*, a law prohibiting the glorification of the National Socialist regime. The boundary between these two terms is often fluid and difficult to determine. Moreover, these terms are controversial within the scientific community. For a discussion, see Schiedel (2007: 23ff.).

- “as is well-known, in the United States, politics is being made behind the scenes: elites, dubious circles, high finance and various lobbies (e.g. AIPAC) are the financial backers and the true rulers” (*Die Aula* 04/2010: 23);
- “a convention of the grand lodges” (*Die Aula* 06/2010: 16); and
- “the architects of the financial-Shoah, who sent Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac, Lehman Brothers, Meryll Lynch, AIG and Washington Mutual into the credit-crematoria” (*Die Aula* 04/2009: 24ff).⁷

All these accusations are opaque and inaccurate. They leave room for interpretation, which is part of the conspirative logic: not naming something exactly only makes it more mysterious, as even experts are unable to see the whole picture. This conspiracy arises from a misunderstanding of the economy and an inability to recognize abstract forms of domination. Postone identifies this way of thinking as crucial to modern antisemitism:

In modern anti-Semitism [the imagined Jewish power] is mysteriously intangible, abstract and universal. This power does not usually appear as such, but must find a concrete vessel, a carrier, a mode of expression. Because this power is not bound concretely, is not “rooted,” it is of staggering immensity and is extremely difficult to check. It stands behind phenomena, but is not identical with them. Its source is therefore hidden — conspiratorial. The Jews represent an immensely powerful, intangible, international conspiracy. (Postone 1980: 106)

Another frequently used metaphor in *Die Aula* consists of biologized descriptions of capitalist structures. This usually takes the form of comparing the old, sane, natural form of capitalism to a despicable, abnormal growth that has to be brought under control:

- “the venom of global neoliberalism” (*Die Aula* 04/2008: 37);
- “financial investors as locusts” (*Die Aula* 11/2008: 26; 02/2009: 22);
- “predator-capitalism,” “Hydra” (*Die Aula* 03/2009: 32, 40; 06/2010: 25); and
- “banks as ravenous wolves” (*Die Aula* 06/2010: 25).⁸

These comparisons fit into the practice of biologizing capitalist structures as mentioned by Postone. A similar line of reasoning can be found when the newspaper’s contributors deal with problems of interest. The concentration on this particular branch of capitalist production is typical of a shortened, superficial analysis of capitalism. Furthermore, the critique of interest provides an excellent example of how the various aspects mentioned above can be combined: the fetishized critique of capitalism, the alleged Jewish influence in the sphere of circulation, and the concept of parasitic and unnatural growth.

5. SILVIO GESELL AND HIS FOLLOWERS

This idea of abnormal outbursts of capitalism leads us to an alternative economic system that some contributors to *Die Aula* have in mind. Starting from the demonization of interest, they end up at the *Natürliche Wirtschaftsordnung* (Natural Economic Order), which is based on theories developed by Silvio Gesell (*Die Aula* 03/2009: 34; 06/2009: 16ff; 11/2009: 10ff). Inspired by the early anarchists (in particular Proudhon), Gesell (1862-

⁷ All quotes have been translated by the author.

⁸ *Ibid.*

1930) argued that money and interest were the main obstacles to the true liberty of humankind. Whereas all workers and farmers have to work for their income, capitalists and landowners do not and live parasitically off unnatural interest. His solution to this problem was to introduce interest-free money, known as *Freigeld* or free money. The main difference between *Freigeld* and regular money is that *Freigeld* has an expiry date. It loses a certain percentage of its value every month. This is meant to prevent money owners from hoarding, thus keeping the money in constant circulation.

In a contemporary context, Gesell's theory forms the basis of so-called exchange circles and regional money initiatives. These exchange circles became known to the wider public in Argentina during the economic crisis that struck the country around 2000. After a couple of months, these circles collapsed spectacularly. At a theoretical level, Gesell's ideas are still discussed in academic circles. Furthermore, Gesell's followers have tried to become an accepted current within (radical) left-wing discourses by committing themselves to the anti-globalization movement. In Germany, for example, at least two such groups are official members of Attac Germany: the *Initiative für eine natürliche Wirtschaftsordnung* (INWO) and the *Christen für eine gerechte Wirtschaftsordnung* (CGW). In addition, Gesell's theory is often used by radical right-wingers as well as esoteric groups.

This paper is not the place to criticize Gesell's theory in detail (for such a critique, see Rakowitz 2003). However, it is a striking example of a fetishized understanding of the economy, and it shows quite clearly why this is so interesting to right-wing authors. The first point is certainly that the whole program has a racist — or at least social-Darwinist — component:

Natural selection in its full, miraculous effectiveness is then restored. ... No matter how great the quantity of abnormal material resulting from the propagation of defective individuals will be, that is brought into nature, natural selection can cope with it. Medical art can then delay, but it cannot stop eugenesis. (Gesell 1922: xi)

Of greater relevance to this paper, however, are the theoretical affiliations between right-wing ideology and Gesell's theory.

(i) The whole idea that there is such a thing as a natural economic order is very tempting to antisemitic agitators. Gesell's followers often use biological metaphors to promote their theory, such as the idea of a natural growth process. Everything in nature grows until it reaches a natural boundary, such as human organs. If they kept on growing forever, we would eventually die. In contrast, interest grows without a natural boundary and keeps on growing forever. Furthermore, it does not grow naturally but in an exponential manner. Gesell's followers claim that nothing in nature grows exponentially, except cancer cells. Therefore, interest equals cancer and must be cut out of the organism.

(ii) The focus on only one aspect of the capitalist economy facilitates the personalization of economic processes and leaves room for conspirative, antisemitic interpretations. I do not claim that all Gesell's followers are antisemites; I just want to show that this theory is structurally antisemitic and therefore dangerous. The whole theory is not a radical critique of capitalist society but just a critique of one aspect of it. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this, but the problem is that Gesell's theory exudes the aura of a revolutionary movement, of establishing paradise on earth, when all it does is to make a small adjustment to the current system. Marx described this form of critique as being "within the limits of what is permitted by the police and not permitted by logic" (Marx 1989: 29).

6. CONCLUSION

The notion of a radical movement that is actually not radical at all is precisely the kind of conformist rebellion referred to in the introduction that tends to include antisemitic aspects. When Adorno and Horkheimer state at the very end of "Elements of Anti-Semitism" that "it is not just the antisemitic ticket which is antisemitic, but the ticket mentality itself" (Horkheimer & Adorno 2004: 217), this is also true of the critique of capitalism. It is not just the shortened and explicitly antisemitic critique of capitalism that is antisemitic but the shortened critique as such.

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