

Critical Political Economy approach

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Abstract

Critical Political Economy is a transdisciplinary field of enquiry that is gaining ever more popularity among scholars and activists alike. In addition to analysing social power relations that revolve around how humans collectively organise production and social reproduction over time and space, Critical Political Economy also problematises the resulting social inequalities and asymmetrical manifestations in private and public (state-)institutional settings. Particularly the various forms of exploitation that are constitutive to the continuation of global capitalism are brought into question rather than accepted as givens. Critical Political Economy not only offers a particular way of understanding the world, but also seeks to produce knowledge that allows for social emancipation and that ultimately contributes to the politicisation and the resilience of social struggles. Thus, while giving ontological primacy to the negative, Critical Political Economy is essentially committed to a positive ontology by animating and awakening radical imagination about alternative futures.

Key words criticism and critique • capitalism • social inequality • exploitation • emancipation • transformative praxis.



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Introduction

This commentary both concludes the first issue of the new journal *Global Political Economy* and challenges not only scholars in our field whose work features within this volume but also those who will contribute to successive issues of this journal to remain conscious of the importance of knowing what we mean by, and leading debates about what is critical about, Critical Global Political Economy. Following Johannes Jaeger's (2022) piece in the current volume entitled 'Fighting the beast of the apocalypse: three fundamental reasons for a Critical Political Economy approach to Global Political Economy', and following from his, and Lipietz's, argument that the conditions within Global Political Economy cannot be understood nor theorised using one explanatory nor highly abstracted 'beast' alone, I postulate that the prefix 'critical' in the study of the global economy has probably never before been so much *en vogue* as it is today and worth fighting for. Particularly since the outbreak of the 2007–08 global economic and financial crisis, there has been a growing interest in the inherent contradictions of capitalism, the rise of global debt and the root causes of capitalist crises – all themes that take centre stage in Critical Political Economy theories and analyses. Indeed, who would not want to be critical at a time when global debt levels have reached historically unprecedented heights, heralding the advent of a crisis that may be far more dramatic than what we have witnessed since 2007–08? Moreover, even the most unwilling observers have to admit that the social inequalities and hardship exposed and exacerbated

by the COVID-19 pandemic are linked to global capitalism, or that the relentless drive for profit-seeking has left behind a mammoth ecological footprint, a legacy of abuses of human rights and labour standards, the plundering of the global South and conflicts over natural resources. However, is even multidimensional critique, scepticism and reflexivity with respect to the downsides of the global economy sufficient to be critical? The prefix ‘critical’ is a self-assigned label, and what it means to be critical is often not further elaborated upon (Wigger and Horn, 2016). With the increased usage of the term, inflationary tendencies may surface, risking that ‘critical’ is merely a rhetorical proclamation or ‘a posh synonym for criticising’ (Sayer, 2009: 768). This article explores ‘the critical’ in Critical Political Economy and argues that Critical Political Economy comes with a range of ontological and epistemological commitments that go beyond mere criticism or critique. In particular, the role of explanatory critique in informing an emancipatory and transformative agenda is identified as the crux of what it means to be critical. The first section of this article sketches the key ontological tenets, while the second discusses the role of normative claims and contrasts Critical Political Economy with what is commonly referred to as ‘mainstream’ political economy, teasing out some key ontological, epistemological and methodological differences. The third section provides an overview of Critical Political Economy research communities and academic outlets that feature Critical Political Economy research. Of course, this article does not attempt to offer a canonical ‘state-of-the-art’ account of different Critical Political

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Economy approaches and research (see Keucheyan, 2013 for a comprehensive overview that goes beyond this sketchy portrayal of the basic ontological premises).

Critical Political Economy: an ontological primer

Critical Political Economy long used to be linked to Western Marxism, and in particular the Frankfurt School, or, at least, in canonical overviews, Marxist or Marxist-inclined approaches have almost routinely been labelled critical. Indeed, Karl Marx, through his engagement, among others, with the idealist philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, has laid the foundations of critical thought. His philosophy of science, method of enquiry and his understanding of the theory-practice relationship continues to be central to Critical Political Economy. However, the prefix ‘critical’ is no longer associated with a single theoretical approach, and also pertains to feminist, reflexive, postcolonial, postmodern or poststructuralist approaches, and approaches committed to a post-positivist epistemology more generally (Linklater, 1992). The famous distinction between ‘critical’ and ‘problem-solving’ theory by Robert Cox (1981; 1986), one of the key exponents of Critical Political Economy, has levelled the road for a wide range of approaches that go beyond Marx. Then again, Cox, through popularising the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), also ensured the continuation of Marxist legacy in the field of Global Political Economy, where Critical Political Economy constitutes a major pillar. Yet, Critical Political Economy spans several disciplines, and is therefore truly transdisciplinary in nature. In fact, Marx was also writing at a time when Economics, Sociology, Political Sciences were not yet established as separate disciplines. The field of Global Political Economy asks who produces what, when, where and how; how this translates in social power relations; and by extension, how the dynamic interplay of agents shaping and contesting how production is being organised and governed becomes manifest in governmental

and non-governmental institutions. Critical Political Economy takes this a step further by not only analysing but also problematising the resulting social order, and the underlying ideational and material (production) structures, as well as the institutional strongholds that create and recreate this order. As Cox (1996: 88) defined it, Critical Political Economy asks how this order came about, what the key mechanisms of power are and whether it is about to change. Most Critical Political Economy approaches, and most certainly historical materialist or Marxist, including Gramscian approaches, are rooted in an essentialist understanding of social reality, which entails that humans need to produce and reproduce to ensure their survival. These biological life requirements are satisfied through interacting with nature and with each other. The labour invested in the fulfilment of all the human wants and needs is usually a collective endeavour, and leads to social power relations. In the words of Cox (1986: 1), production ‘creates the material basis for all forms of social existence, and the ways in which human efforts are combined in productive processes affect all other aspects of social life’. The (re-) production of everyday life through labour lies at the foundation of every economic and political system, and the contemporary form through which production and social reproduction are collectively organised is capitalist in nature. In contrast to the vast majority of political economists, who are reluctant to engage with capitalism, or merely mention capitalism in passing only, Critical Political Economy explains social phenomena and power relations in and through capitalism. While the social power relations emanating from the capitalist organisation of (re-) production change over time, they are fundamentally skewed: the vast majority of people have to sell their labour power in return for a wage, and a minority, owning the means of production, extracts surplus value from labour in the form of a non-compensation of labour time. The accumulation of surplus capital through exploitation lies at the

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heart of social struggles; yet, in addition to the capital-labour nexus, exploitation can also become manifest alongside sex, gender, age, race, ethnicity and people with different abilities or sexual orientation.

Conclusion

Critical Political Economy is committed to a sustained ontological enquiry about the contradictions of global capitalism and the social struggles revolving around various forms of exploitation. While the same struggles can be analysed from a mainstream perspective, Critical Political Economy goes beyond mere analysis by seeking to prepare the ground for political alternatives that improve the conditions of social life. To be critical should therefore be more than just a rhetorical assertion and be accompanied by an emancipatory praxis. Importantly, Critical Political Economy does not prescribe a fixed pathway towards such an alternative order but rather entails a plurality of philosophies of praxis. Leaving the comfort zones of mere capitalist critique and envisaging a non-capitalist future may seem as a dauntingly naive endeavour. Alternative visions are always incomplete and imperfect and replete with contradictions. Yet, the mere possibility of envisioning a different world already holds the prospect of it becoming a viable project, particularly if we understand utopianism as ‘perpetually

exploring new ways to perfect an imperfect reality' (Niman, 1997: 302). Spelling out utopias as we continue to fight the proverbial beast of the apocalypse already entails a presentiment of how to get to the envisaged future society.

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