

Open Marxism 4

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Open Marxism 4

Against a Closing World

Edited by Ana Cecilia Dinerstein, Alfonso García Vela,
Edith González and John Holloway

Foreword by Werner Bonefeld



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Introduction: Open Marxism Against a Closing World

*Ana Cecilia Dinerstein, Alfonso García Vela,
Edith González and John Holloway*

We write against a closing of the world. Walls are going up around us. The wall on the USA border with Mexico, the walls that UK Brexiteers would build, the walls being constructed by left and right nationalisms all over the world: walls of exclusion, of borders, often walls of hatred, walls of pain. Intellectually and academically too, walls are going up around us. In the universities (where the four of us work), the walls of academic correctness are growing bigger: the pressures of competition, insecurity and the precarity of academic work, combined with quality assurance committees, lists of indexed journals and quantitative criteria of assessment, make it harder, especially for students and young academics, to write what they want to write. To say what they want to say. The disciplines of the social sciences are becoming just that: disciplines. While resistance struggles continue and expand outside academic walls, critical thought is being squeezed out of the universities, reframed in innocuous forms or simply sidelined. Gradually, often without us noticing it, critical terms become taboo. They become 'dirty words' (Brunetta and O'Shea 2018). Increasingly, these dirty words begin to be whispered, until they fall out of use altogether. 'Revolution' is the most obvious one, but also 'class struggle', and 'capital' too. The more atrocious the barbarity of patriarchal and colonial capitalism becomes, the less we can name it.

Radical thought has not come to an end though. Not at all. The critique of capital exists. But it survives mainly in the shadow of the criticism of the *forms of expression* of capital: authoritarianism, neoliberalism, the financialisation of the economy, policy failure, the crisis of representative democracy, etc. We write against the closure of the world, then, because we see a danger in some of the present struggles today: that we *only* demand regulation, job creation, distributive justice, transparent democracy, etc. In our view, these criticisms and demands are

necessary and important but they are incomplete without a critique of capital (see González, in this volume). With the intensification of the fetishisation of social relations, emancipation looks like a ghost that everyone laughs at. Talking about emancipation becomes simply absurd. The idea of a ‘society where “the development of each is the condition for the development of all”’ (see Gunn and Wilding, in this volume) seems meaningless. In recent years, and particularly since the financial crisis of 2008, capital has become simultaneously more abstract and more aggressive. Neo-fascism, war, xenophobia, feminicide, racism, ecocide, and repression against all resistances around the world – you name it – signal a world enclosed by walls. This is now a world ‘without a Front’ (Bloch cited by Amsler 2016: 26). Instead of ‘being the place of becoming of “the world, of world process”’ (Bloch cited by Amsler 2016: 26), a *world without a front* is a world where hope is constantly diminished, misinterpreted as fantasy or optimism, or dismissed for building castles in the air when we need to discuss the ‘urgency’ of today’s world crisis (see Dinerstein, in this volume). Is there no way out? The institutional left offers an alternative: ‘Vote for us’. But is this institutional hope a real alternative? Or it is a way to save capitalism from itself? (Holloway, Nasioka and Doulos 2019). The alternative offered by institutional hope is a short-term promise of ‘controlling’ capitalists and producing a capitalism with a human face, for the many. But how? When trying to answer this simple question, institutional hope collapses against the walls of a reality where the frenetic logic of capital and the command of money over life prevails. For us, as Bonefeld suggests in his Foreword to this volume, ‘looking on the bright side is not an option’.

Marxism is an insolent word. But to retain its insolence, it must constantly be reinvented. It must spit against the horrors of capitalism but, to do that, it must also reject the closed dogmas of its own tradition. The notion of open Marxism has been outlined in the introduction to *Open Marxism 1* (Bonefeld et al. 1992a). The term appeared for the first time in 1980, in the publication of a debate between Johannes Agnoli and Ernst Mandel about Marx’s critique of political economy titled *Offener Marxismus*. *Offener Marxismus* became a project of opening up the categories of Marxist thought, and more (see Bonefeld’s Foreword). Open Marxism was set up as a new form of understanding the categories developed by Marx, especially in *Capital*, not as predetermined laws but as conceptualisations of class struggle(s). Against the old dichotomy of class struggle and laws of capitalist development, open Marxism chal-

lenged Marxists, radical intellectuals and activists to explore money, capital, the state, the law, and so on, as forms of struggle from above and, therefore, open to resistance and rebellion. A key aspect of open Marxism is then to negate *both* capitalist society as well as the dogmatic closure of its categories. The focus is on critique, a critique that investigates the internal contradictions of capital which assert themselves as both theory and struggle. As the editors of *Open Marxism 1* stated in their introduction, ‘critique is open in as much as it involves a reciprocal interrelation between the categories of theory [which interrogates practice] and of practice [which constitutes the framework for critique]’ (Bonefeld et al. 1992a: xi).

The open Marxists’ critique has had a substantial impact on the rethinking of Marxism in the twenty-first century, especially but not exclusively in Europe and Latin America, and several books have emerged from the approach,¹ which has generated many reviews, debates and criticisms. These range from general evaluations of the open Marxist interpretations of Marx’s theory, theory of the state, global capital and class struggle, critical theory, social form and human praxis.²

This volume continues the work initiated by open Marxism in the 1990s. Its aims are no different from the previous three volumes: to (re)think how to break the descent into barbarism; to break capital by venturing through a theoretical exploration to free the critique of capitalist labour economy from economic dogmas (see Bonefeld’s Foreword); to open up to the movement of struggle and to understand itself as part of that movement. That, for us, is the project of open Marxism, and is why we are presenting this collection of essays as the fourth volume of *Open Marxism*. We regard Marxism as an emancipatory theory, a theory of struggle, rather than as an objective analysis of capitalist domination. As John Holloway highlights elsewhere, ‘to speak of struggle is to speak of the openness of social development; to think of Marxism as a theory of struggle is to think of Marxist categories as open categories, categories which conceptualise the openness of society’ (1993: 76). To Marx, ‘[t]he critique of social forms ... amounts to a critique of economic categories on a human basis and it does so by returning the constituted forms of the economic categories to “relations between humans”’ (Bonefeld in Bieler et al. 2006: 178). We endorse what the editors of *Open Marxism 2* two expressed in their introduction:

the openness of categories – an openness on to practice – obtains as a reflexive critique of ideologies and social phenomena, which, for

their part, exist as moments of historically asserted forms of class struggle ... Open Marxism insists on the antagonistic nature of social existence. This being so, the Marxist understanding of a unity of theory and praxis entails *not* the theoretical suppression of class struggle, but the invocation of class struggle as the movement of the contradiction in which capital, itself, consists. (Bonefeld, Gunn and Psychopedis 1992b: xi and xii)

Openness means openness of categories, of debates, of our hearts, of spaces for critique, of fronts of political possibility (Amsler 2016; Dinerstein, in this volume).

This fourth volume of *Open Marxism* gives fresh impetus to the intertwining of theoretical discussion and radical, anticapitalist practice with a selection of authors that we consciously sought to include: not only the established names associated with open Marxism but also a new wave or second generation of open Marxists. The fact that this new generation includes a high proportion of women and Latin Americans says much about the way that rebellion and rebellious thought have been moving in recent years. Our aim is that open Marxism should be open to the changing flows of struggle, although it must be admitted that the reference lists of the various chapters remain heavily dominated by white men.

The contributions to this volume were inspired by the broad idea of 'open Marxism against a closing world', but the authors were left free to decide how to contribute to it. This editorial decision responds to the aim to discover and present to the reader some of the open Marxists' theoretical developments and political concerns of the past two decades. We have grouped the eleven chapters that follow around three main subjects: open Marxism and critical theory (Part I); global capital, the nation state and the capitalist crisis (Part II); and democracy, revolution and emancipation (Part III).

In past decades, there has been a renewed interest from journalists, academics and activists in exploring the meaning and the authority of Marx's work today. Yet, as Hudis and Anderson highlight in their introduction to Dunayevskaya's *Selected Writings on the Dialectic in Hegel and Marx*, 'one surprising feature of much of the current return to Marx ... is the relative silence on Hegel and the dialectic' (2002: xv). In the opening essay of this collection, Richard Gunn and Adrian Wilding return to Hegel to recover the *revolutionary* notion of 'mutual recognition' as

theorised by Marx and – before him – Hegel. Gunn and Wilding argue that the recuperation of the notion of mutual recognition is one of the ways to renew an ‘open’ Marxism in the twentieth century. For them, recognition can become a unifying theoretical and uniting principle of the Left. By exploring Marx’s discussion of the term against the setting of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the authors underline the common revolutionary impulse of both Marx and Hegel, and how they uncover the contradictory forms which recognition takes on in a world of domination and institutional alienation.

One of the central concerns of open Marxism has been, and still is, Marx’s notion of the unity between theory and praxis. Following Bonefeld et al., Marxist orthodoxy takes this unity as ‘referring to the “field of application” ... and is reflected in the separation between the logic of capital, on the one hand, and social practice, in the other’ (Bonefeld et al. 1995: 2). The next four contributions by Ana Cecilia Dinerstein, Alfonso García Vela, Mario Schäbel and Frederick Harry Pitts speak to this problematic in different ways, addressing the contributions of Theodor W. Adorno, Ernst Bloch, open Marxism and the New Reading of Marx (NRM) to the theorisation of the relation between object(ivity) and subject(ivity) in our understanding of radical change. In Chapter 2, Ana C. Dinerstein re-evaluates the place of the theoretical in today’s praxis. By pointing to the sphere of social reproduction as the ‘site’ of both new forms of class struggle and the renewal of critical theory, Dinerstein argues that critical theory today should be based on Bloch’s philosophy of hope. Despite the critical theorist’s fear of the positivisation of social struggles, Dinerstein argues that the fight against barbarism is not only possible but *already exists* in the form of struggles for alternative forms of life. In a context of the crisis of social reproduction, these struggles should not be regarded as *positive*: they are *critical affirmations* that affirm life as a form of negating a totality of destruction in a ‘*contradictory*’ manner (see Gunn 1994). To her, while Adorno’s negative dialectics (Adorno 1995) remarkably prevents dialectical closure of the capitalist totality from taking place *theoretically*, negative dialectics cannot open onto a ‘world with Front’ in *practice*. And this is what is needed today.

Alfonso García Vela opens his chapter with the assertion that open Marxism does enable us to overcome the positive conceptualisation of dialectics, totality and emancipation typical of orthodox Marxism, with practical relevance for anticapitalist struggles. However, referring mainly to John Holloway’s work, he claims that open Marxism

has not yet solved the problem of the separation between subject and object, between structure and struggle. He points to what he calls the open Marxist's 'subjectivist' position, which conceives of the object only as a mode of existence of the subject. This, argues García Vela, can be regarded as a voluntarist perspective on emancipation. According to the author, this contrasts with Adorno's primacy of the object which contests the subjectivism of modern thought and therefore opens the possibility of rethinking the dichotomy between structure and struggle beyond subjectivism, without relapsing into the objectivist position represented by structuralism. Also, for García Vela, the transformation of the world requires the self-reflection of critical thought, because critical thought is not separated from capitalist society but emanates from it. An important aspect of Adorno's negative dialectics is that it calls to the self-reflection of thinking. So, if the critical theory of open Marxism wants to contribute to changing the world it must undertake self-reflection. Otherwise, it runs the risk of its reification.

In Chapter 4, Frederick Harry Pitts highlights open Marxism's critical contribution to value-form analysis. To be sure, orthodox economics cannot grasp the real problem of the expansion of 'money as command' (Cleaver 1996), because their 'abstract abstractions' try to 'get rid of contradictions in definitions' in such a way that economic categories do not explicate 'the phenomenon from which the economic abstraction comes' (Ilyenkov 2008: 243, 103). Open Marxists follow Marx in his critique of 'abstract' or 'formal' abstractions, and work with determinate abstractions insofar as they embody the contradictions of the real movement of struggle. As Gunn suggests, 'if it is a "theory of" anything, Marxism is a *theory of contradiction*' (1994: 53). 'Without contradiction,' argues Bonefeld, 'inhuman forces like Capital and Money, are naturalised and the economy becomes something superior, unmanageable, as existing above us, like God' (2016: 235). Pitts's assessment of open Marxism's contribution to value-form analysis makes exactly this point: while for the NRM 'the validity of economic categories such as labour and value does not hold in abstraction from society as whole,' for open Marxism value is a historical – contradictory – process based on class struggle. To Pitts, while both open Marxism and the NRM offer a 'radically open and non-dogmatic unfinished project,' open Marxism should be valued for having restated the centrality of class struggle at the core of the NRM's 'monetary' theory of value.

In Chapter 5, Mario Schäbel also discusses the work of the NRM, exploring its synergies with open Marxism. However, his focus is on the association of open Marxism with Adorno's negative dialectics. Schäbel enquires whether open Marxists can be regarded as the successors of Adorno's critical theory or not. His analysis suggests that open Marxism can *only* be considered an offspring of the Frankfurt School in connection to Herbert Marcuse's subjective idealism rather than Adorno's critical materialism, the latter having been embraced by scholars of the NRM. Unlike Pitts, Schäbel does not regard either open Marxism's rejection of the *primacy* of the object over the subject, or its restatement of class struggle at the core of the analysis of capital and the value-form, as contributions that could 'fix' the NRM's 'objective' analysis of capital. To Schäbel, open Marxism's closeness to Marcuse's critical theory, rather than Adorno's, risks replacing 'the dogmatic and one-sided materialism of orthodox Marxism with an equally dogmatic and one-sided idealism based on granting the subject absolute primacy in the context of the dialectical unity of subject and object'.

The next two chapters offer innovative critical approaches to two of the traditional concerns of open Marxism: global capital and the state, and the crisis of the accumulation of capital. In Chapter 6, Sagrario Anta Martínez joins those who have challenged the adequacy of Marx's notion of primitive accumulation today (Dalla Costa 1995; Harvey 2005; Bonefeld 2008; De Angelis 2008), particularly when the context is the possibly terminal crisis of capital (see Ortlieb 2008; Kurz 2010). She suggests that as a 'system of social organisation' capitalism does not ensure the reproduction of the human life, but quite the opposite: it is destroying the sources of social reproduction, and therefore leading to a crisis of the latter (see Dinerstein, in this volume). Anta Martínez offers the term 'terminary accumulation', as opposed to primitive accumulation, to suggest that, in the current global situation, talk of primitive accumulation is simply anachronistic. With 'terminary accumulation' in mind, she then explores the antagonism between capital and life and the limits of the former as a form of social organisation. In Chapter 7, Rodrigo Pascual and Luciana Ghiotto examine the established idea in the discipline of International Political Economy (IPE) that the state possesses territorial foundations, while capital maintains itself as global, free and non-territorial. Their analysis – which connects open Marxism's recent contributions to long-term debates about the relation between the state, multinational corporations and imperialism – demonstrates that

the realist perspective in IPE embraces this partition, which is based on the analysis of the two moments in the process of accumulation of capital: production, which requires territoriality, and circulation, which does not. However, Pascual and Ghiotto challenge this separation and argue that territoriality and non-territoriality are not attributes of the state and capital respectively, but a result of class antagonism. Territoriality and globality imprint a tension in the domain of class exploitation, and this can only be resolved temporarily within the territorial contours of the State.

The third and final part of the book concerns democracy, revolution and emancipation. In Chapter 8, Katherina Nasioka traces the effects of the capitalist crisis since the 1970s, and the shifts that are observed in class struggle as a result of this ongoing crisis. She argues that the anticapitalist struggle today displays two mutually contradicting dynamics which reflect the intensity of the capitalist crisis and the sharpening of contradictions in the capital *relation*. On the one hand, the twentieth-century's dominant form of political organisation of the working class, hegemonised by the labour movement and guided by the Leninist canon, is hard to assert in the present-day context. On the other hand, the contemporary struggles against capital, which are defensive in most cases, are often fought in the name of 'we, the workers', looking for class unity in those categories that have built the identity of the labour movement in the past, e.g. the nation, the state. Therefore, while organisation based on the working class is debilitated, the lack of class unity is challenging the prospect of revolution. Nasioka asks, then: how can new struggles be translated into a political prospect that goes *against-and-beyond* capitalist society? In Chapter 9, Sergio Tischler might provide a plausible response to Nasioka by bringing the case of the Zapatista movement (Chiapas, Mexico) into the discussion of revolution today.³ Tischler suggests that Zapatismo has not been a simple revolutionary movement of a local character, but has implied a shaking of contemporary revolutionary thought on such fundamental issues as the relationship between Marxism and the revolution today. Zapatismo offers a critique of the Leninist canon of revolution, that is, of the revolutionary subject conceived typically from the perspectives of vanguard and hegemony. The relevance of the Zapatistas' autonomy lies in it being a *practical criticism* of the idea of the vertical and state-centric subject of the anticapitalist transformation. Through the images and practice of

Zapatismo, a space and a political-conceptual process was opened that can lead to a re-conceptualisation of the anticapitalist struggle.

In Chapter 10, Edith González starts with a critical reflection on the place that democracy occupies in left thinking today. She is concerned about a shift that has taken place in that thinking from revolution to democracy, and the political consequences that this bears for any process of emancipation. González argues that democracy has become the central theme in both critical analyses of the past decade and in social movements and grassroots political discourse and practice. To be sure, Occupy Wall Street and social movements in Argentina have become symbols of resistance against capitalism. These movements have reinvented radical democracy by means of a new ‘horizontalism’ (Sitrin 2006; 2012). They are regarded as agents of the prefiguration of a new democracy (Brissette 2013; Teivainen 2016). But are these movements aware of the limits of the use of the concept of ‘democracy’ without a critique of capital? To González, the equality that democracy can promise in a capitalist society is, in fact, an abstraction of inequality. Therefore, the question is: ‘what is the power of the anticapitalist “democratic” struggle without a critique of capital?’ The concept of capital, argues John Holloway in the final chapter of the book, is crucial for understanding the present situation of the world. Here, Holloway engages with the categorisation of his open Marxist approach as being ‘subjectivist’ (see Schäbel and García Vela, in this volume). Using ‘the train’ as a metaphor for the inherently expansive and destructive nature of capital, Holloway claims that capital is not a pure object for the domination of the subject. Rather, capital ‘is a struggle’. It is clear that we have produced ‘the train’, he argues; that is, the train is a ‘social construct’, and it became ‘objectified’ as the dominant form of social relations ‘through bloody struggles’. Capital has its own rules. However, the problem starts when we ‘understand capital simply as a form of domination (as capital-logicians and New Readers of Marx tend to do)’. Holloway suggests that while the ‘primacy of the object’ characterises capital, *it is precisely that which we must break*. There is a dissonance in the relation between subject and object: ‘The presence of the object within the subject has been much emphasised, but what interests us more is the destructive force of the subject within the object, the presence of the subject in-against-and-beyond the object as its crisis.’