

Riccardo Emilio Chesta, Wolfgang Streeck

# Crisis and Critique of Social Sciences. Wolfgang Streeck in Conversation with Riccardo Emilio Chesta

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# Crisis and Critique of Social Sciences

## Wolfgang Streeck in Conversation with Riccardo Emilio Chesta

by Riccardo Emilio Chesta *and* Wolfgang Streeck

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### 1. Introduction

A recent debate on Europe as monetary union and political project brought the German public philosopher Jürgen Habermas to establish a dialogue with an old companion: the sociologist Wolfgang Streeck.

Taking off from some of the theses contained in Streeck's latest book, *Buying Time: The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* [Streeck 2014a], the two scholars renew the public discussion on the crisis of the capitalist economic system in terms of democratic crisis and particularly as a political crisis of the European Union [Habermas 2013; Streeck 2013]. Apart from being German and, of course, European, the interlocutors are bound by some closer ties – having been contemporaries at the University of Frankfurt in the heady days of “critical theory” and of the student movement.

Accordingly, the debate picks up on the thesis regarding the economic, social and political forms of “advanced capitalism” (*Spätkapitalismus*), which to a non-expert reader could seem somewhat stuck in a past German intellectual moment – that of the 1960s renewal of Marxist theories on capitalism. In *Buying Time*, Streeck – Emeritus Professor in Economic Sociology and Political Economy at the Max Planck Institute for Social Research in Köln – uses indeed those contributions in light of his long scientific path as one of the scholar of greatest renown in the field of industrial relations and political economy.

Compared to other representatives of the so-called “second generation” of the Frankfurt School, Streeck developed a distinctive theoretical profile and research program. He refused the discursive turn taken by Habermas vis-à-vis the forms of communicative agency, with its main orientation on the analysis of the forms of democratic legitimation. However, his way of doing sociology diverged also from the intellectual routes followed by Oskar Negt – leading into the analysis of media and identity politics – and by Claus Offe, with his macro-sociological theory of capitalism and democracy.

Rather, Streeck’s oeuvre marks a return to a resolutely materialist analysis of production systems, drawing on the latest methodological and empirical developments within the comparative political economy literature. In this package, “critique” finds its place in a renewal of social theory on capitalism and democracy built on a firmly empirical research program.

We took the opportunity of Wolfgang Streeck’s visit to COSMOS, the Center on Social Movement Studies at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Florence, to pose him some questions on his practice of sociology, and on the meaning of “critique” in the contemporary social sciences.<sup>1</sup> In this interview, Streeck retraces his intellectual and scientific trajectory, giving an account of the tensions surrounding both the scientific institutionalization of his work, and its political use. If Streeck’s trajectory has taken its course in world-renowned scientific institutions – the Goethe University in Frankfurt, the University of Madison-Wisconsin, the Max Planck Institute and so forth – it has also consistently been linked to a form of public engagement that follows the evolution of German sociology and society within broader processes of both specialization and globalization of the discipline. Seen from a privileged observatory – like the Faculty of Sociology in Frankfurt in the 1960s – it is also possible to diachronically understand the particular process of institutionalization experienced by German sociology within the general changes affecting the German philosophy of higher education. For example, the relation with students’ associational and political cultures where Streeck also socialized – the IG Metal trade unions and the KPD as opposed to the “middle-class radicals” of the SDS (*Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund*) – are considered expression of personal and collective identities – or even, forms of life – essentially intertwined with the constitution of research interests and intellectual biography.

Thus it is no surprise that the emergence of industrial relations and political economy as an autonomous research field is closely interconnected with the waves of growing expectation toward a progressive democratization of western capitalist

<sup>1</sup> The interview was held in Florence, at Palazzo Strozzi, on May 30, 2016.

societies at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s [Schmitter and Streeck 1981; Crouch and Streeck 1997]. The “golden age” of corporatism in industrial relations were indeed fostering confidence in the possibility of a domesticated capitalism combining efficiency and growth, as well as redistribution and social justice. Therefore, if German capitalism was – and still is – one of the central cases against which to examine the crisis of this reformist politics, the internationalization of political economy research allowed the accompanying disillusion to be observed and assessed from a comparative perspective, in a global context of neoliberal restructuring [Streeck 2014b].

The following dialogue with Wolfgang Streeck also aims to shed light on the practice of sociology as a Weberian *Beruf* – a professional and intellectual craft – and to elucidate its possibilities and limitations in the working and living conditions of contemporary academia.

## 2. Conversation

**Riccardo Emilio Chesta:** The first question concerns the main outcome of the debate on “Late Capitalism” that started during your first training in Frankfurt at the end of the 1960s. What are the main paradigms and the lesson you take into account for your ways of practicing social research nowadays and specifically contemporary research on capitalism?

**Wolfgang Streeck:** Your questions refer to a time that is difficult to understand for someone studying social science today. It was a different world, for better and for worse. Briefly, you’re asking what the important formative experiences were for someone like me, not coming from an academic background. I had had nine years of Latin, six years of Greek, and excellent training in literature, philosophy and the like, and one might have thought that I was really well-prepared. But when I arrived at the university I found myself in a context that appeared completely alien to me, as it did to quite a few of my fellow students. Today the way you study sociology is hyper-structured: there are methods courses, courses on how to use a library, how to write a scholarly paper or give a conference presentation. At that time, there was no structure at all. Professors still lived in the old German university where students arrived ready for independent research, the *Abitur* being like the *Master* today. Students just came to seminars and took part in the discussion, and if they had something to say, professors listened to them. If they didn’t, they didn’t belong there. It took me two years or more to feel even remotely at home in this world.

I should add that I could live with this as I arrived at the university in 1966 as something of a political radical, way before student radicalism spread in 1968 – a condition that was not preordained by family background. I had decided to go to university rather than work as a journalist because I was interested in leftist politics and wanted to learn something useful for it. To my surprise, this was not something on offer in the world of critical theory as it existed then. What did impress me, nevertheless, was how seriously our academic teachers – Adorno, Horkheimer, Habermas – were taking intellectual life. You can say: *existentially seriously*. As a student you could learn, mostly by observation from a huge social distance, that the life of a scholar in the Frankfurt sort of social science was not about passing examinations and getting a job but about wrestling with the truth, for the truth – not just in a positivistic sense, but regarding nothing less than the right way to live, what society should be like etc. There was a pathos, a passion behind the kind of scholarship we witnessed and tried to embrace, without anyone “teaching” us in today’s sense, that clearly had to do the fact that in the generation of our teachers, the memory of the barbarism of the first half of the Twentieth century was always present, whatever the subject was that was being dealt with on the surface. What was much less present was the Marxist tradition. Everybody believes today that Frankfurt in the 1960s was a center of Marxist theory. In fact, Adorno and Horkheimer at that time seemed somehow embarrassed about their work from the 1930s, before their emigration to the United States. *Dialektik der Aufklärung* [Adorno and Horkheimer 1947] was suppressed by its authors and had to be made available by the students as an illegal reprint. I think for both Adorno and Horkheimer, who were of course of Jewish descent, the paramount experience of the century was the Holocaust, which they found impossible to explain in the framework of a theory of capitalism. After the war and after their return to Germany and Frankfurt (I remember having always been puzzled as to why someone should want to set foot again in a country that had planned to kill them) the moral reeducation of German society for them took priority over everything else. It even seems that the reason why they substituted the term “critical theory” for Marxism or historical materialism was to make them more acceptable as academic figures in anti-communist Germany. They had both been saved by emigrating to the United States, and I think they had even assumed American citizenship in addition to German citizenship. In any case, the students never convinced them to sign a public statement condemning the Vietnam War.

**REC:** But how was the relation between you and the others in this intellectual environment in Frankfurt, not only the main theorists such as Adorno and Horkheimer, but also the other students and particularly Habermas?

**WS:** Habermas was obviously the rising star. Horkheimer was no longer really active, and Adorno was writing his philosophy of esthetics [Adorno 1970], which was practically impenetrable for the outsiders, certainly for the students and even more for me. On a personal level there was practically no relationship at all. I had a job as a research assistant at the *Institut für Sozialforschung* and sometimes one encountered Adorno on the staircase, which was very narrow. He was an immensely kind man so he didn't want to pass by you without saying something, but he didn't really know what to say, which resulted regularly in unbearably long moments of embarrassed mutual silence. In any case, the old German university had been epitomized as a place of *Einsamkeit und Freiheit* (solitude and freedom in English, but perhaps a better translation of *Einsamkeit* would be loneliness). You were free to do whatever you wanted, but you were essentially on your own. This was more or less difficult to bear – less in my case as my political involvement provided me with a social context that others didn't have. In part the student movement may have arisen from this anomic condition, as students began to build their own social world, being as detached as they were from an official discourse that they could hardly understand.

I am not complaining. As I said, Frankfurt was a place where you could learn to take scholarship really seriously. Nobody ever talked about jobs, or “careers”. Jobs and careers would come as a side-effect, or they wouldn't. What was important was to learn how to think seriously about yourself, about society, about politics. Later in life I rediscovered some at the time more or less disjointed ideas that I was only then able to put into a context and understand – bits and pieces of “critical theory” and its effort to make sense of what was then going on in the world. Why was there no serious analysis of capitalism? Like many others, “critical theorists” (as I said, probably a cover name for those who had in the past been historical materialists, or Marxists) believed that postwar capitalism had been tamed by state intervention and by the rise of large monopolistic corporations, and had been turned into a Keynesian prosperity machine. So the problem was no longer economic, as in the Great Depression, because economically the thing had been fixed once and for all, but political – a problem of legitimation, i.e., of normative discourse, i.e., of an evolutionary logic of moral ideas.

You asked about Habermas. Now of course he himself is an object of study, students are writing dissertations on him, and there are now even scholarly biographies tracing his intellectual and political development. I cannot claim to be nearly as well informed. It is my impression that when I was a student in Frankfurt, Habermas went through his most productive phase, in a way that was truly breathtaking to watch, as he absorbed and assimilated into his own thinking what seemed to be just about everything ever written in philosophy, psychology, and sociology. For us as observers,

his lectures and seminars fell under a common theme, which was “There is nothing from which I cannot learn something.” With hindsight I think he used these years to build up that immense supply of ideas on which he has been feeding ever since, extracting what he believed he needed from German idealistic philosophy, Marxist political economy, American pragmatism, Parsonian functionalism, developmental psychology, psychoanalysis, linguistics, and so on, ad infinitum. Much of this, I now think, was an effort to radically, profoundly break with what he perceived as Marxist economic determinism. But this was not really clear to me at the time. Now I think, colloquially speaking, that on his way from the older Frankfurt traditions to the sort of idealism that I find underlies the theory of communicative action, he must have thrown out the baby with the bathwater, eliminating almost completely what we call “the economy”, or the material reproduction of society, or the social power associated with the ownership of essential material resources.

**REC:** On this point you mention in *Buying Time* [Streeck 2014a] that the sociologists at the *Institut für Sozialforschung* had learned from Pollock that under advanced domesticated capitalism, technocratic management had rendered theories of capitalist contradictions irrelevant. So the problem became one of legitimation, and the *Institut* started studying the political consciousness of students and other groups in society that seemed to be potentially critical or capable of producing crises of legitimation.

**WS:** Adorno was still very much interested in the sources of antisemitism and the authoritarian personality. Habermas, as far as I can say, was concerned about the rise of a technocratic consciousness that he feared would foreclose political discussion about a better society.

**REC:** So this last point brings in the issue of experts and intellectuals, while Marcuse introduces the so called *outsiders*.

**WS:** Marcuse was different; I realized only with distance how close he still was to his time as a student of Martin Heidegger. He was willing to challenge technology and rationality in a more fundamental way than Habermas was. Habermas, who later moved on to some sort of social-liberalism, allowed the rational world, technology, and the economy a legitimate place. Instrumental rationality as such was not to be dismissed or rejected. Rather it was a matter of how you used and controlled them. For Habermas today, I think, the question is one of democracy not allowing the technocrats that are needed to maintain the modern world to confuse their instrumental rationality with the substantive rationality of the “lifeworld”. Whereas in Marcuse, modern technology-cum-capitalism was inimical to the good life due to the historically outdated social discipline that it imposed on people.

**REC:** Yes, because in essays like *The End of Utopia* [Marcuse 1967] he discusses with the students how the actual possibilities of technology in advanced capitalism already makes possible the overrun of natural necessity and the realization of freedom, given that the system is no longer facing material scarcity. Therefore, even in this case, the problem is no longer in the realm of contradictions, but it resides in how a certain power on technology makes accumulation for few specific social actors possible, while at the same time creating new forms of exclusion.

**WS:** This theme was present among the students, and they managed to invite Marcuse to fly in and speak to them. On all of this there is now historical scholarship, and those wanting to know more should consult it. Habermas, of course, was reluctant to talk about revolution, let alone about violence. For him, the political world was, or had to be, a world of discourse and dialogue, of collective reasoning, or in any case had to be conceived that way. Revolutionary violence was never productive, and probably unnecessary, certainly in Germany at the time. When the student revolt turned radical, initially perhaps meaning no more than trying to assign violence a legitimate place in a theory of revolutionary change, he was taken aback early on. And he was right in that he saw early on the putschist tendencies coming that were a disaster for the left.

**REC:** So he used the term “*Linksfaschismus*”.

**WS:** Yes, in the heat of rhetorical battle, and confronted with language that may indeed have contributed to the rise of German terrorism in subsequent years. All of this was long ago, and I have only my personal memories to draw on in answering your question. Clearly there were developments in the student movement in Frankfurt in the early 1970s that resembled what you had in Italy in the form of the *Brigate Rosse*. In any case, you may want to note the difference between Habermas and someone like Marcuse who, given what he identified as excessive repression vested in “the system”, was much more willing to condone revolutionary and perhaps even violent counter-mobilization. Ideas like this you also find in Barrington Moore, Marcuse’s life-long friend and collaborator, who, looking at the United States of his time, at the end of the book on *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* [Moore 1966], argues that the question of revolutionary violence cannot be taken off the agenda even and precisely in affluent, economically developed democracies such as the United States. He leaves this question open, whereas Habermas had, I think, very early and more or less implicitly, opted for social-liberal democracy, at a time when many of his students found Mao-Tse Tung’s aphorism, according to which “political power comes out of the barrel of a gun,” increasingly plausible.

**REC:** When you say “the students”, which group are you referring to? Did you belong to any specific group, like the SDS (*Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund*)?



**WS:** I never joined the SDS because in my perception at the time, it was much too upper-class in its social composition. I was interested in “the working class”, real people as organized in trade unions and the Social Democratic Party, especially its left wing, which was in opposition to the national leadership and which was particularly strong in Frankfurt. In fact, at some point in 1968, I was about to join the then-illegal Communist Party (*KPD, Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*). If I had I would have ended up with two party cards at the same time: one from the SPD, which was legal, and one from the KPD, which was illegal. Comrade Brezhnev rescued me when he invaded Czechoslovakia and friends of mine there were expelled from the CP and even had to go to prison.

**REC:** Concerning your intellectual trajectory, when was the moment in which you decided to start to specialize on industrial relations? Does this have to do with this cultural and political environment in Frankfurt?

**WS:** It had both a political and an intellectual reason. To make a contribution as a social scientist, I had to find something where I would not feel overwhelmed by the intellectual powers that were ruling Frankfurt – a sort of niche-building exercise. Nobody knew much about industrial sociology, so I began to focus on trade unionism and business associations, on workplace participation, corporate governance, etc. Some of my friends at the time were trade union officials who were also activists in the local SPD. I often had lunch with them at the canteen of the metalworkers union, *IG Metall*, which was an important source of social contacts as well as material support. On such occasions I became curious how such organizations really work. For a long time from then on, my intellectual and political agenda became to explore the possibilities for a democratic society with strong trade unions to domesticate the capital-labor relationship through institutional regulation: what sort of institution was necessary for this and what sort of political mobilization? So you can say that my work on democratic corporatism, on trade unions, on production systems, on markets and the relationship of different political economies to material production was an attempt to contribute to an up-to-date, if you will “laborist” concept of social democracy. How to defend and extend the configuration of postwar democratic capitalism in such a way that it remained redistributive in an egalitarian sense – a reformist program that tried to preserve and develop the idea of democratized capitalism into the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s. In this period, I was working as a leftist empirical social scientist, with a policy orientation that was not necessarily connected to the grand theories. I wanted to be useful.

**REC:** So it was a moment in your intellectual trajectory in which you turned to empirical research.

**WS:** It was empirical research in a political perspective, in touch with reformist policy-making and in particular trade unions, even later, in the late 1980s when I returned to the United States. The idea was to use what we know as scholars to help make this society pragmatically and practically better than it might be without reformist intervention. This is the starting point of the article in *Stato e Mercato* that you mention [Streeck, 2014b].

Looking back at my own career, I would like to add that I was lucky to be among the first generation of social scientists whose careers were genuinely international, in the sense that we were, from early on, part of an international cohort of colleagues, first fellow students, then fellow professors, a cohort which shared perspectives, observations, results, conclusions. In 1972 I had had enough of the increasingly neurotic Frankfurt scene, with Bader-Ensslin-Meinhof and their friends having become a collective obsession, so I went to study in the United States, supported by a very comfortable scholarship, hoping to get away from what was left of the Frankfurt School after Adorno's death and Habermas' move to the Max Planck Society. Ridiculously, however, when I arrived at Columbia, one of the first things they showed me was the office where Adorno and Horkheimer had worked after their arrival in the United States!

Back to what I was about to say. During this time and later on, I settled into an international group of people who got to know each other in the 1970s, such as Colin Crouch in Britain, Marino Regini in Italy, a little later Philippe Schmitter in the U.S., Robert Boyer in France, Jelle Visser in the Netherlands, and others. They all shared the idea that democratic politics could and should be used to inject an element of egalitarian interest representation of labor into an otherwise liberal democracy and what still was a capitalist political economy. I suppose this was and still is the *Stato e Mercato* program. We continued to work along these lines for several decades after the excitement of the 1970s was over, after the terrorist turn of the radical wing of the student movement and the liberal-democratic turn of "critical theory". This is now becoming a long story. Let's cut it short and say that in the early 2000s, with the progress of financialization, as I say in *Stato e Mercato*, many of us felt forced slowly to accept that this program had had its time and that it was about to lose its political significance in a world of declining growth and increasing inequality – to accept the disappearance of labor-inclusive corporatism on a broad front and the arrival of "post-democracy".

The work that I did from then on returns to the notion of capitalism. It looks at the global system of advanced capitalism, the family of rich capitalist democracies as a whole. It draws on previous work in comparative political economy, although for me now, the commonalities of national capitalisms have become more important than the differences. For a while, many of us were intrigued as to how Germany,

as a relatively large country, managed to be relatively egalitarian well into the 1980s while at the same time being economically successful. But this ended in the 1990s and thereafter, when German capitalism increasingly became like neoliberal capitalism, bringing back older, fundamental questions about capitalism as such. For me it was the moment when I began to adopt a longer-term perspective in institutional change now conceived as capitalist development, which implied that the social-democratic institutionalism that we had cultivated for so long might have had a problem, or you could say: might have suffered from a theoretical problem, which was that it was not sufficiently rooted in a theory of capitalism.

**REC:** In this regard you mention the notion of “late capitalism”. In which sense was it a useful but ambivalent notion?

**WS:** In the 1970s the idea of “late capitalism”, or *Spätkapitalismus*, implied that capitalism was on its way out because in a democratic society it could not pass the test of legitimation. Under democracy, in the long term, a social order would and could achieve legitimacy essentially only if it was a post-capitalist social order: one that was able to satisfy newly arising, “post-materialist” human demands for autonomy, participation, self-realization. The 1980s, a decade later, were a time when critical political economy in the strict sense was almost dead. By this I mean that economic crises and questions of economic power were seen as unimportant for the stability of capitalism, whereas the real problem was for the capitalist way of life, the *Lebenswelt* as reshaped by the requirements of continuing capital accumulation, to be accepted as, well, legitimate. So critical political economy was replaced with comparative political economy, which came down to reasoning about what one can do differently in different countries to make them more equitable – more capable of achieving legitimacy with a more demanding citizenry – while preserving their economic prosperity. How can one jointly attend to demands for both economic efficiency and social justice – this was the political core of historical-institutionalist comparative political economy. The kind of political economy that was coming out of economics at this time was efficiency theory pure and simple, and the work of Peter Hall and David Soskice on “varieties of capitalism” [2001] began to intersect with it. With hindsight I regard their approach as economistic efficiency theory dressed up as historical-institutionalist social science.

In my view, the construction problem of the critical theory of the 1970s that presaged the march into “varieties of capitalism” was what they bought into the Keynesian idea of the ability of the State to turn capital into a wealth-production machine to be operated by, essentially, technocrats, based in the state or in large corporations. This was a view that was widely shared among the social-democratic parties of the time – social-democratic in a generic sense. It might have been recognized as mistak-

en already in the 1970s when the revolt of capital and its handlers against the postwar order of “democratic capitalism” began. In a metaphor I have sometimes used, the 1970s were a time when capital had had enough of having to serve as the milk cow of democratic politics, reasserting its true nature as a predator – a hunter for limitless profit – and demanding to be let out of the Keynesian-democratic cage for the adventure of taking care of themselves in the wild.

When the social-democratic project began to falter, where I thought I could make a contribution was by bringing back to the debate the long-forgotten or underestimated notion of the historicity of capitalism and its endogenous dynamic of capital accumulation. In other words, the formation that is called capitalism is not a machine, but has a will of its own – or more precisely: it is a social configuration driven by collective imperatives imposed and enforced by a ruling class. As such it is given to certain behaviors that we cannot choose or not choose, as long as we live in a capitalist society. One of these behaviors is for capitalism continuously to expand its range. It has to grow. My friend and colleague Joel Rogers and I were among those who in the early 1990s rediscovered Polanyi, when we were developing an economic sociology program at the University of Madison-Wisconsin. Central to our reception of Polanyi was his concept of a “double movement”. While this is not a complete theory of capitalist development, it has at its core the idea of a historical movement that is endogenous and goes in a certain direction – commodification, marketization – unless you do something about it and it is checked by a counter-movement. The correct critique of technocracy, this is to say, is not the reintroduction in theory and practice of free democratic discourse to guide technocracy into the right direction. The real critique is to recognize that what you are dealing with is not technocracy at all but a live animal that wants to eat you – an alien that wants to subject your collective and individual life to its strange obsessions – and you have to do something about it.

**REC:** Basically you reintroduce an element of agency, criticizing the fact that the theories of late capitalism were almost a form of Neo-Functionalism.

**WS:** Yes, absolutely. It is an immensely complex issue as we are dealing with the question of whether we can have, or have to have, a theory of societal evolution. That is, if societies are historical phenomena and they develop in a particular direction, what drives that development and determines in what direction it proceeds? Is the driving force a dynamic of capital accumulation or of economic rationalization or of moral discourse, or indeed progress? What sort of irreversibility do we have to assume, if any at all – in technology, democratic participation, market expansion, moral consciousness? Essentially it may be an issue of materialism versus idealism, but playing the two against each other may be a mistake. One has to see material tendencies and moral reflection as two movements modifying and correcting each other.

I think this is exactly what someone like Polanyi has been trying to conceptualize: he explains how there is an underlying material dynamic and then there is a political, religious, ideological, humanistic response to it, hopefully capable of governing the material dynamic to which it responds.

**REC:** How do you think the analysis of the morality of capitalism presented in Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello's book [1999] fits in here? They introduce the multiple dimensions of morality created by capitalism to justify and legitimate its existence, but also its capacity to subsume some critical elements present in society – as exemplified by the so called “1968 artistic critique”.

**WS:** I don't believe in total subsumption. My fundamentally optimistic belief is that capitalism can never encompass the totality of human existence. There's always something more there. And that “something more” is going to be rebellious. In fact you can see it even today, in a consumption-controlled world where large numbers of people are deeply dissatisfied although there is now huge, highly sophisticated machinery at work specializing in making them feel good. What makes people feel dissatisfied is not just material deprivation. Sometimes dissatisfaction expresses itself in such terms, but often what is really behind it is that people hate being pushed around, and that working as an “event manager” or buying one pair of running shoes after the other is, in the longer run, not enough to make you happy. In this sense I think Boltanski and Chiapello are overstating their case. The book is convincing to a point, as it points out how flexible capitalist strategies of integrating “human resources” into the accumulation process are and how inventive they can be if they face a new generation. They know they have to do something to suck fresh blood into their machine, but I don't think they can suck them in one hundred percent. If this were possible it would indeed be the end of history. Perhaps this is the Marcusean world of one-dimensionality. Marcuse, like Heidegger, would claim that you can do whatever you want in order to domesticate the human existence, but there's always something more than you can grasp. Essentially I believe that, too.

**REC:** In fact, this Heideggerian idea of the irreducibility of ontology in the face of scientific and technological conceptions or domestications is also one of the main foundations of Max Weber's sociology. Its view of the disenchantment of the world as a natural outcome of the process of rationalization of the Western world was a pessimistic or even desperate view, but at the same time Weber also recognizes the disruptive character of the lifeworld (through phenomena such as social movements, charismatic leaders, etc.).

**WS:** Yes. Rationalization can only go so far. There will always be a struggle for a space where individuals are liberated from social constraints. No institution will ever be able completely to subject its subjects. As sociologists know, this applies even to

total institutions, such as prisons. In fact, prisons have been found to be privileged spaces for human creativity, for example with regard to how to bring in drugs or guns. Or think of the complex underground societies that existed in concentration camps, in spite of barbaric efforts to destroy them.

In my work on institutional change with Kathleen Thelen [2005], we conceive of institutions in the Weberian sense as *Herrschaftsverbände*, with rules and norms enforced by a staff endowed with specific means of power. The struggle is over the creation of the rules and their application. Even the simplest rule, if applied to a specific situation, needs interpretation, and in this sense following a rule is always a creative act. You can apply a rule in different ways and you can fight over its meaning. Every situation to which a rule is to apply is different – it is particular while the rule is general. When a rule is made, not all of the specific situations in which it is to be applied can be known in advance. As a result of the unpredictability of the concrete situations in which a norm has to be applied, norms (meaning also social structures) evolve all the time through their interpretation “on the ground”, through their inevitably creative application.

This is one way of saying that there are always spaces of uncertainty inherent in social structures that make these structures dynamic. On a larger scale you can say that any institution is contestable and therefore will be contested, and social arrangements will turn critical when they meet a situation that was not anticipated when they were made. Applying this to the history of capitalism: at a certain point it exists in a certain way, changes the world, and then, once the world has changed, must change as well through reform, or be changed through revolution – but it cannot be static, regardless how hard one fights to keep it as it is.

**REC:** On this last point, how do you introduce the role of intellectuals, who nowadays have to face difficult obstacles? In a conference at the EHESS in Paris you were talking about the functions of critique. You were basically affirming that nowadays intellectuals are not asked to intervene in the public sphere by political parties or others – because they need electoral strategists, public relations specialists and all these technocratic professions that are used for very specific practical goals like running a political campaign or winning elections. How do you think it is possible nowadays to practice a critical role as intellectuals and to whom does this intellectual have eventually to speak?

**WS:** This is a big puzzle. Is anyone listening? Who is being listened to? As a minimal definition of the role and the social space of critical intellectuals, we still have some influence in our classrooms, although there are significant efforts to take it away from us – I’ll just mention the Bologna Process and university reform in general. The range of ideas we can discuss in academia, and the way we can discuss them, is

narrowing under the pressure of economization. Our first task, I believe, is to defend with claws and teeth the freedom and indeed the practice of academic discussion. In the last chapter of his *General Theory* [1936], Keynes asks himself whether what he thought he had found out about the nature of the capitalist economy and what one could do about it would actually be applied in practice. People now in power, he says, have learned what they believe they know when they were between 20 and 30 years old; later they remain beholden to it and are unlikely to return to learning. As academic teachers it is our privilege that we can reach those that are now in their formative years and make them familiar with the latest ideas, hoping that they will in a decade or two be in a position to apply them. Leaving aside the question of whether we have that much time today, using the university as a basis for disseminating new ideas requires a university that doesn't exclusively consist of examinations and the acquisition of social entitlements. Such universities are rare today, and they are becoming rarer. They must be defended and extended, meaning that the life of a productive social scientist will have in good part to be devoted to organizing resistance to strong and growing pressures for ideological and intellectual uniformity.

**REC:** In your opinion, what are the journals in which it is possible to publish innovative and critical research?

**WS:** In American sociology we have seen interesting developments taking place in recent years. Many articles in the *American Journal of Sociology* now have an historical background and understand that the United States of America is not as a matter of course the universal model of modern society. Moreover, the economy, and indeed the political economy, is given an increasing role. Fewer and fewer sociologists today seem to be willing to abide by the peace treaty that Talcott Parsons negotiated with the Harvard economics department, defining the turfs of the two disciplines in such a way that they didn't get into conflict with each other – in effect depriving sociology of some of its most important and most foundational themes. Also, journals such as the *Socio-Economic Review* (of which I was chief editor for five years), *Economy and Society*, and others like them are wide open for work in political economy. I'd also like to mention journals outside of the narrow range of scholarly publications that are worth considering, such as the *New Left Review*. I was surprised how many people in the social sciences read work published in the *New Left Review*, as compared to mainstream sociology and political science journals. Basically I think that one has to be attentive to these possibilities and indeed that we should learn early how to reach people who are not members of our discipline – to speak to an audience that doesn't consist exclusively of social scientists. This is what I tried to do in *Buying Time*, and apparently it seems to have worked.

**REC:** So you mean that you made an effort to make your book readable for non-specialists, for social actors who are affected by the actual situation of contemporary capitalism.

**WS:** When writing, I always try to be as clear as possible. When I write a text, I revise it ruthlessly, at least three times. And I try to be merciless with myself, going over each sentence to detect and clear up any unclear or foggy phrasing. I read my writing with the eye of a detective: is there something I myself have not completely understood, which means it cannot possibly be understood by someone else.

**REC:** Is this approach maybe an outcome of the fact that you feel sad about having missed too many of Adorno's classes?

**WS:** That was such a long time ago. What is true is that I don't want my students to pretend that they have understood something if I have failed to express clearly what I wanted to say. After a seminar session I sometimes remember points in the discussion when with hindsight it seems to me that I have papered over a gap in my own understanding in order to be able to say something. I associate such situations with specific expressions on the faces of students in the audience, some of them looking blank while others make an effort to pretend they have grasped something that they couldn't possibly have grasped because it was not clear enough. There are also students who have convinced themselves in response to unpleasant seminar experiences that something can be recognized as particularly sophisticated based on the fact that they found themselves unable to understand it. So, in Latin, *clare et distincte* is the way you should make yourself work hard to write and, hopefully, speak. Then the gap between professional writing and writing for an educated public is not so dramatic. If you discipline your professional writing to say only what you have really understood yourself, you can express it in a way that it is intelligible not just for specialists.

**REC:** As a last question, something that I didn't plan to ask you but that came out of our discussion today. You said you studied ancient Greek and Latin for several years. It seems that your sociological and intellectual formation is linked to what we could ideally call a European *Bildung*. As a German sociologist, you have a classical background – a link with the Latin or Mediterranean world that seems to date back to Goethe's *Italienische Reise* or Weber's tour in Italy – do you think this should be an important part of the background of a European sociologist?

**WS:** I wish it were. For me at least, being European is inevitably connected to being able to feel a sense of the interconnected European history when looking at a particular landscape or cityscape in Europe. This is helped by at least some familiarity with the foundation of European languages in our common cultural mother tongue, Latin. When someone asks me where I feel emotionally at home, my answer is Europe in the borders of the Western Roman Empire. There's another angle to this, which



is that I am convinced that if you want to do good sociology, you have to read a lot of history. At some point, when I found myself moving away from functionalism and policy research and toward the inherent dynamics of social change and development, it was a confirmation that it is important to know about the history of the societies we study as well as the history of the theories of such societies. Incidentally, one should not forget how much of sociological theory draws on the history of the Western Roman Empire, especially its decline and fall – not least Max Weber of course. I am far from being competent in these areas as a scholar, but I do like to read as much as possible on this period in my free time (which was supposed to have increased since I became emeritus) just to enrich my repertoire of subjects, puzzles, and examples.

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## Crisis and Critique of Social Sciences

### Wolfgang Streeck in Conversation with Riccardo Emilio Chesta

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**Abstract:** Retracing Wolfgang Streeck's scientific path, the following interview illustrates some key nodes in critical political economy to finally focus on the general state of contemporary sociology. As a specific stream of a scientific niche, critical political economy addresses indeed relevant questions to both empirical research and sociological theory. Rooted in the so called "critical theory", Streeck explains how every analysis of the institutional frameworks of contemporary capitalism cannot be detached from a historically grounded and a theoretically informed macro-sociological research. This peculiar articulation allows moreover to investigate the relations between social sciences research on diversity of capitalism and its political salience for democratic capitalism. Moving from personal experiences until general assessments on the state of the discipline, the interview finally aims to shed light on the practice of sociology as a Weberian *Beruf* – a professional and intellectual craft – and to elucidate its possibilities and limitations in the working and living conditions of contemporary academia.

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*Keywords:* Critical Sociology; Political Economy; Democratic Capitalism; Neoliberalism; Intellectuals.

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**Wolfgang Streeck** (Lengerich, 1946) is Emeritus director of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne. Considered as one of the contemporary heirs of the "critical theory", he studied sociology at the Goethe University Frankfurt with Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Jürgen Habermas. Moreover, he pursued graduate studies in the same discipline at Columbia University between 1972 and 1974. Recent publications include *Buying Time. The Delayed Crisis of Democratic Capitalism* [Verso Books, 2014] and *How Will Capitalism End?: Essays on a Failing System* [Verso Books, 2016]. More information about him and his scholarship are available on his personal website: <https://wolfgangstreeck.com/>