



MARX, ENGELS, AND MARXISMS

Marx and Contemporary Critical Theory

The Philosophy of Real Abstraction

Edited by
Antonio Oliva
Ángel Oliva
Iván Novara

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Marx, Engels, and Marxisms

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This volume has been something of a miracle for us. Twenty years ago, the logistics of publishing such a global contributor list and of bringing together scholars from the many countries represented in this table of contents would have made this book impossible. And although this volume is a result of our respect for and conviction in a work that we feel continues to offer the deepest and most complete explanation of how our old and battered world works, this miraculous project could not have been realized without the invaluable help of many people. As the nobility obliges, here go our thanks.

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Introduction

Antonio Oliva, Ángel Oliva, and Iván Novara

As a social critique of contemporary reality, another non-dogmatic reading of Marx's oeuvre may seem a barren and unsatisfactory endeavor. Even when Marxian thought—as well as Marxism, as a whole and through its different currents 150 years on—still provides the most robust analysis and the most radical critique of mercantile society and of the political forms of exploitation and domination that capital has deployed, the end of this second decade of the current century will see capitalism reign unchallenged across the world, fully globalized in its homogenizing ways of producing and reproducing social relations, and most important, with a huge capacity, in both qualitative and quantitative terms, for the creation of material wealth which, nonetheless, remains beyond the reach of three quarters of the world's population.

The reasons why a political alternative to capitalism, with agency and visibility, was not deployed after the fall of the so-called actually existing socialism are beyond the scope of this introduction and of this volume. Nonetheless, we cannot dodge the very significant paradox that can be perceived since the beginning of this century. On the one hand, there is a capitalism increasingly ruthless in its irrational ways of assigning value to

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capital, which destroys life. On the other, we see the loss of theoretical and political references at an international scale required to restrain it in order to establish a society founded on bases other than wealth as value. This capitalism does not allow us to envision a hopeful future for the large majorities and pauperized peoples. Despite this, and in significant contrast, during these last three decades, the most fruitful and non-dogmatic rereadings of Marx's oeuvre and, to a lesser extent, of Marxism as a whole have proliferated at a global scale, conforming for the first time since the late nineteenth century a true corpus of interpretations that begin to be connected to current non-conformist movements.

Regarding the analysis and interpretation of Marxian works, the different current rereadings, reinterpretations, and theoretical and political reconsiderations are, without a doubt, heterogeneous, but they all comprise three aspects which, in our consideration, unify them.

To begin with, new approaches, both collective and individual, to Marx's oeuvre, have been forged from outside—and often stemmed from a devastating critique of—the main two Marxist currents of the twentieth century, that is, social democracy and Soviet-style Marxism–Leninism, which, even when they represented an alternative to capitalism, not only failed, but to a certain extent fostered the theoretical and practical sustainment of capitalist regimes. Notwithstanding the undeniable contribution of both currents to the reconstruction and dissemination of Marx's ideas and, more prevalently, to the elaboration of political programs and interpretations within clearly revolutionary contexts, some of them successful, it is also undeniable that their partial and dogmatic approach to as well as religious canonization of Marxian works precluded the development of a true political alternative capable of overcoming capitalism. As a result, they have both stalled and fossilized since at least the 1970s.

In this sense, the aforementioned new contributions, freed from such dogmatism, have carried out novel rereadings of Marx's oeuvre by addressing some of its most overlooked aspects and through the critical analysis of its better-known theoretical premises. At the same time, they have attempted to reconstruct Marx's oeuvre, something significantly difficult, due not only to the vicissitudes of Marx's writings after his death, but also to their constant mutilation and distortion by the aforementioned social–democratic and Marxist–Leninist currents of Marxian thought.

The most ambitious contemporary project to reconstruct Marx and Engel's oeuvre is the Marx–Engels–Gesamtausgabe (MEGA²), which aims at producing a new comprehensive edition of Marx's and Engels's com-

plete works. It started in the 1970s and is still ongoing. Initially published by the Marxism–Leninism Institutes of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) in Berlin and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in Moscow, under the direction of Dietz Verlag (Berlin), MEGA includes all works published during the life of Marx and Engels and many previously unpublished manuscripts and letters. All texts in MEGA are in their original language: the majority in German, but with many in English and French. Being an academic, historical and critical edition, most of the volumes in MEGA include appendices that provide additional information about each text. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the publication of the MEGA project was transferred to the Internationale Marx–Engels–Stiftung (IMES) in Amsterdam, which is still working on it. So far, 65 MEGA volumes have been published, and the whole project is expected to comprise 114 volumes (Musto 2011; Fineschi 2013).

Secondly, the emphasis in the critique of Marx’s oeuvre, in our opinion, has conveniently moved from highlighting the most traditional aspects of the theory, such as exploitation in capitalist systems (the theory of surplus value and its developments) and the subjects who bear emancipating essences within a class structure (the working class, the proletariat), toward the production of several readings which focus on the critique of political economy and review the critique to the ideology of mercantile society. More specifically, these readings emphasize the validity of the theory of value-labor, the objective character of capital’s social domination through the abstract forms of value and the articulation between such abstract forms and Marx’s specific method of analyzing capitalism.

Precisely, beyond their heterogeneity, the emphasis of contemporary approaches has been on the specific character of each historical era and on readings that understand the forms assumed by social wealth through value in capitalism as non-transhistorical,¹ as well as on the structural character of abstract and social labor as first-order determinations in the theory of value, and even the analytical method adopted by Marx when rereading Hegel. Furthermore, there has been a painstaking effort to delimit, mainly through the idea of crisis sketched by the different contributions to the critique of political economy, the possible ‘passages’ to societies not governed by class divisions and not determined by the forms of wealth based on value-labor (Kurz 2000; Jappe 2003).²

Thirdly, with different degrees of accuracy and adherence to Marx’s oeuvre, Marxist scholarship of the last 30 years has become increasingly more transnational, something which so far has not received enough

consideration. The possibilities of global access to Marx's oeuvre and the emergence of technologies that enable work beyond strict national boundaries have allowed production and knowledge which are not rooted, as during most of the twentieth century, at a national (or international) scale. On the contrary, breaking political and linguistic barriers, they produce collaborative projects with contributions from the six continents. We can now state that there is a 'Marxology' with different study centers devoted to the transversal socialization of knowledge and to the connection of those theoretical achievements to possible social practices for anti-capitalist transformation (Elbe 2013; Musto 2015: 7–40).

Out of the debates emerged from the review of Marxian thought and the contemporary reconstruction of Marx's oeuvre, Marxian scholars have highlighted the doubts generated by the interpretations of the Marx's analysis of the capitalist system which make use of categories which were not explicitly stated by Marx. For instance, it is worth mentioning that the concept of 'capitalism' is not in itself present in Marx's oeuvre and that he used the historical ideas of 'commodity-producing society' or 'mercantile society' to name the historical period he was analyzing. Nonetheless, the word 'capitalism' applied to the time period in which capital is still dominant as a social form, which governs all relations, is used frequently enough and with such theoretical rigor to occupy a clearly interpretative place within Marxian analytical categories. When examining the controversy between 'exoteric' and 'esoteric' analysis, in our opinion, a specific distinction is pertinent. We believe that one thing is the critique to the imposition of concepts and categories from outside of Marxian theory which attributes to it theoretical developments that Marx would not have formulated and are sometimes directly opposed to his thought as a whole, for example the metaphysical ontology of the proletariat. A very different thing is that the social critique based on Marx's thought (as a starting point for a critique of capitalism) has not been able and may not be able in the future to develop new categories for new realities. Therefore, an orthodox following *avant la lettre* of his writings, namely a merely philological study of the oeuvre, will tend to preclude any fruitful initiative or even updates and new readings not only of Marx's oeuvre itself (and of its most faithful reconstruction possible), but also of the social reality to which a social critique must necessarily refer.

The theoretical problem of real abstraction belongs within this area of constructive inference from an analysis of Marxian thought, although it was never explicitly formulated by Marx as a concept. The concept of real

abstraction was coined by Alfred Sohn-Rethel in the 1950s, but he only developed it fully in his *Geistige und Körperliche Arbeit* (Intellectual and Manual Labor), published in 1970, at the same time as new readings of Marx focused mainly on the importance of the theory of value. Sohn-Rethel's field of analysis, his concern with understanding the genesis of social forms of thought, and his knowledge of the main problems in political economy led him to think, through a critique of Kantian apriorism, that in societies where commodities are exchanged there are operations of objective abstraction which, unconscious to the subjects who perform them, determine, as general forms of social praxis, the forms of abstract thought that allow us to know such societies. In summary, the abstractions for knowing are preceded and determined by the practices of real abstraction at the core of economic operations in mercantile societies.

Sohn-Rethel analyzes the fact that, in exchanges, people do not consciously abstract the use values of the commodities they exchange. Commodities are abstracted as a pure quantity and as a universally imperious substance. Even when the people participating in the exchange are not conscious of the abstraction of the commodity's use value, the abstraction is still an objective characteristic of their actions. In this sense, the abstraction is real by opposition, because it is only performed as a thought process. According to Sohn-Rethel, this phenomenon has fundamental philosophical relevance, to the extent to which mercantile exchanges become a generalized practice in a society and impose a specific world view upon the members of such society. If we observe where the author locates the practical operations of abstraction, we must agree that they belong in the plane of social relations, the same practical field and the same path of determinations where Marx places determinations of value. The insistence in locating practical operations of human abstractions/commodities at the moment of exchange led Sohn-Rethel to explore the origins of money. He suspected that such abstractions were present as phenomena of social praxis in ancient societies, like ancient Greece, which had developed a tight relation between the social deployment of commodity exchanges and their philosophical capacity of generating abstract thought.

Thus, Sohn-Rethel's intuitions were articulated in the 1970s as a two-way path, which enriched analysis. On the one hand, they supported, in general terms, the theoretical problems postulated in the 1940s by members of the Frankfurt School like Adorno and Horkheimer, who, from different perspectives, presented a negative critique of the irrationality of capitalist objectivity beyond the capacity of reason to apprehend the real.

On the other hand, there were new readings of Marxism that, as we have seen, reread the Marx of the critique of political economy and, more specifically, the qualitative analysis of value which, through the simple form of the commodity and its unfolding into use value and value, are presented as objective forms of exchange products.³

Since then, many theoretical problems have derived from Sohn-Rethel's thesis. This volume attempts to trace them throughout the debates of the last few decades which are regarded as central to Marxian thought.

First, Sohn-Rethel's theoretical position regarding the transhistorical character of real abstraction differ from the way it was conceived by the mature Marx. When Sohn-Rethel restricts the synthetic operations of abstraction to the transactional moment of exchange, making even the conversion of human labor into abstract labor, he removes the convergence of practical determinations that Marx establishes to explain the set of abstract forms—from the simplest ones, led by the genesis of value in commodities, to the more concrete ones, like the production of the form of capital—which make up mercantile production in contemporary societies. In this sense, the transhistorical character of the concept restricts abstract social relations to the synthetic field of the market, excluding the phenomonic character where exchanges appear in capitalist societies. In this manner, the determinant character of abstract human labor as labor time, considered as the substance of the value of commodities, is blurred as the determination of the abstract character of commodities. Thus, in Sohn-Rethel we see a true inversion of the determinations presented by Marx already in the *Grundrisse* of 1857. The best recent productions about real abstraction, some of them included in this volume, resume a critique of Sohn-Rethel, recovering perspectives such as those found in Isaak Rubin's groundbreaking *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* (1973) by or in Hans Georg Backhaus's classic *Dialektik der Wertform* (1997). They adopt the Marxian analysis of abstract labor and socially mediated labor in capitalism as key and historically determined concepts, fundamental to understanding social forms abstracted at the moment of exchange.

Second, Sohn-Rethel establishes an identity and an unmistakable kinship between abstract processes occurring in the conformation of practical relations between people in exchanges and cognitive faculties resulting from said practical relations, something fundamental to delimit the problem. Attempting to enlighten the epistemic differences between the conceptual elements in Kantian philosophy and in a Marxian materialistic approach, Sohn-Rethel sets out to demonstrate that the relation between

formal elements in social synthesis and formal components of knowledge is not a simple analogy, but a true identity, and that the verification of this identity would result in a demonstration that the conceptual basis of knowledge is conditioned by ‘the basic structure of the social synthesis in each era’ (Sohn-Rethel 2001: 16). From this aporia in Sohn-Rethel derive a wide range of problems about the ways in which social relations as phenomenally present in society, the corresponding conceptual tools for their cognitive apprehension, and the method that would order such tools are related. These results make necessary a more intense analysis on the epistemological plane of Marx’s theory. One of the most important elements is the open debate on whether the concept of real abstraction in Marx can be stated only in the plane of the *Darstellung* (the form of expression of knowledge of the real) or it is part of the same analyzed object as manifested in social relations. To any extent, the identity of the *Darstellung* and reality itself places us fully within the debate—already established by a contemporary critique of the theory of value—about the depth of the relation between Marx and Hegel or, in other words, about the degree to which Marx’s expository method follows Hegel on the emergence of the real from its abstracted forms presented by the phenomonic. The problem of real abstraction, and thus the significance of Sohn-Rethel’s intuition, assumes the existence of abstractive operations, very close to the forms of the human unconscious that objectivize the social relations which determine and dominate the women and men who perform them, irrespective of the cognitive method that they use to comprehend them, but also conditioning it. Therefore, conceptualization would seem to be a phenomenon independent from the epistemological strength of the Marxian method, as it occurs in social praxis, that is in the real.

The problem expands, because it is not possible to verify the phenomenon in reality by means of empirical methods. The conscious abandonment of any empiric verification of phenomena as they were present in the apparent social reality led Marx back to Hegel and to establish his *Logic* as a pillar of the expository presentation of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* of 1859 and, of course, *Capital*.⁴ Regardless of the weight we attribute to the adoption of a Hegelian method in the critique of political economy, the reach of the practices of abstraction in the social reality of capitalism and especially the form adopted by these practices of abstraction in the human mind for the comprehension of such reality were not sufficiently explained by Sohn-Rethel, even though this problem constituted the center of his approach.

If real abstraction, as a theoretical problem in contemporary societies, transcends the methodological aspects adopted by Marx, and if real abstraction is constituted by operations that determine the forms of knowing but are objectivized in reality, what kind of relational operations are they? Are they contradictions, inversions, abstractions, separations, that operate in social formations to reproduce mercantile society? In which sequence and under which historical and material conditions? How does this problem appear specifically in Marxian works? These questions circulate in the volume that we now present, and are articulated with other questions of the same significance: What connections can we establish, for instance, when we think about the problem of real abstraction in Marx and when his thought goes from a critique of ideology to a critique of political economy as an ‘anatomy of society’? Moreover, what is the practical relation between the consciousness of the unconsciously abstractive process, the current forms of domination based on it, and the path to a society without these forms of domination? This volume attempts to think these questions in their strategic sense.

The purpose of the first section of this volume is to trace the theoretical background of abstraction phenomena in Marx’s oeuvre which, in most cases, is equal to concepts that Marx himself adopted in order to explain the nature of these phenomena in commodity-producing societies. Nonetheless, since this set of problems took shape under the concept of real abstraction—a term coined by Alfred Sohn-Rethel which highlights the practical and not merely the mental principle of abstraction in the shaping of the social behavior of individuals, the construction of forms of comprehension, and the conformation of social relations—the presence of this epistemological, gnoseological and political trope in Marx’s oeuvre requires the inclusion, in this reconstruction, of contemporary and subsequent contributions from early readings of Marxian works that help delimiting it. Thus, this reconstruction of the problem, centered on Marx’s oeuvre, requires a critical reconsideration of Sohn-Rethel as the thinker who has brought to a contemporary realm the question of real abstraction.

Perhaps nobody deals most directly with the critical aspects of the concept of real abstraction in Sohn-Rethel than John Milios. He starts with Marx’s method and its misunderstandings, which leads him to a prompt consideration of the commodity in its dynamics. In these dynamics, he finds a social homogenization of the individual labor processes and productive processes through abstract labor. For Milios, value and abstract labor are constitutive categories of the capitalist mode of production, as he

believes that the relation established by Sohn-Rethel between the economy of Ancient Greece and capitalism breaks the link between capitalism and wage labor. Therefore, it is only possible to talk about real abstraction after wage labor has established itself as a generalized commodity in a capitalist mode of production.

On the other hand, by tracing the intellectual construction of the origins of the concept of real abstraction, Jan Hoff addresses the ways in which William Petty and Benjamin Franklin influenced Marx on his theory of value. In his notebook about Franklin in 1858, Marx considers him as the father of the labor theory of value. For Hoff, there is a turning point in Marx's consideration about Franklin in May 1863, when he systematizes Petty's oeuvre, placing the latter as the first predecessor in the analysis of the determination of the magnitude of the value of commodities.

Pablo Nocera's purpose is to approach the uses, appropriations and shifts in the notion of abstraction initially developed by Ludwig Feuerbach in his critique of the forms of alienation. He also goes through the contribution of Moses Hess, Marx and Engels's companion during the months in which they wrote *The German Ideology* in Brussels. Through this path, Nocera follows the uses that Marx makes of the notion of abstraction in order to explore the form of social abstraction which deploys the logic of exchange and is projected to the whole of capitalist society.

As Marx's oeuvre has been attributed a good amount of concepts which he did not actually use—'real abstraction' being one of them—, in this section, which aims at the reconstruction of this notion within the oeuvre, it has been necessary to include a series of contributions that set forth to deconstruct the wide span of the Marxian conceptual apparatus by resorting to the study of Marx's terminology. Roberto Fineschi carries out a philological reconstruction in later Marxian works of the complex concepts of 'real' and 'abstraction' in order to demonstrate the controversial interpretations derived from a bad reading of said concepts and the variations suffered by both terms in different parts of the oeuvre. This work of terminological precision entails working with differential intensities on the terms used by Marx himself in his oeuvre and those that can be inferred from its thematic tropes, allowing Fineschi to answer the question about 'the limits within which we can use this category'. Fineschi's philological work also sets forth to differentiate in Marx's oeuvre those abstractions which are part of Marx's methodological procedures and those which may be present in practical life. For him, the restriction of real abstraction only to capitalism is another controversial point, and for this reason he distin-

guishes between real abstractions and historically specific real abstractions in capitalism, as they relate to the concept of fetishism: ‘What is specific of the capitalist mode of production is that these abstractions are not simply “real”, but appear as things’.

On his part, Alfonso Iacono locates the problem of abstraction in Marx’s critique and method. He focuses on the theoretical problem addressed by both historians of culture (*Kulturhistoriker*) such as Adam Ferguson, and classical economists. The former by reducing society to a model ‘based on the isolated natural man’ and the latter by building a simplified and ahistorical model underpinned by a poor abstraction, that of the individual and isolated hunter-fisherman. According to Iacono, this is a clearly reductionist construction, which identifies the product of an extremely simple model (i.e. the abstraction of the isolated or individual man), an extremely complex system. (namely the capitalist means of production). For Iacono, then, this is an idealized transposition of the relations in the sphere of circulation onto the relations of production. Marx perceived this transposition, and that is why he took the genetic path of simple categories and not the strictly historical one, thus achieving a double critical path: ‘[...] his problem is not only to put historical analysis back on a firm footing, but to understand the process of simplification/generalization in the models of political economics and therefore the method of abstraction’.

Paul Blackledge researches Friedrich Engels’s contribution to the political economy of the twentieth century through Sohn-Rethel’s work on real abstractions. For Blackledge, Engels’s historical method is problematic, because Engels conflates the genetic procedure of Marx’s commodity saga with a specific pre-capitalist historical stage. Here, Sohn-Rethel follows Engels when he focuses not on this system where the purchase and sale of labor power prevails, but instead on the simple exchange of commodities developed in Classical Greece. Regarding the theory of value, Blackledge suggests that the uses of ‘simple mercantile production’ by Engels are not related to his comprehension of a dialectic, but to his poor understanding of the theory of value. This poor understanding was projected not only onto twentieth century Marxism, but also, in particular, onto Sohn-Rethel’s transposition of capitalist social relations to mercantile forms in Antiquity. For Blackledge, Sohn-Rethel is correct in that abstraction in exchanges is not mental but material. On the other hand, he seems to make explicit what would otherwise be implicit in twentieth-century

Marxism: the difference between Marx and by Engels in their understanding of the theory of value.

Mario Duayer delves into Marx's methodology; in particular, the passages where Marx talks about 'the scientifically correct method' in his famous section 'The Method of Political Economy' of the *Grundrisse*. Duayer sets forth a critique of what he considers a standard interpretation of Marx's method and argues that those passages describe the workings of science in general and not of his method. Following Lukacs, Duayer concludes that the solution for the question is not exclusively methodological or epistemological, but ontological. Lukacs's ontology is based on the parts of Marx's oeuvre where the critique refers to the modes of totalization and to the set of categories with which both political economy and materialist philosophy result in a hypostasis of the existing representational forms of life and are therefore presented as ahistorical. The ontological critique developed by Lukacs is directed to the ontologies which dismiss the historical character of the construction and reproduction of that totality. For Lukacs, what Marx states in his text is not that economists did not realize that they took 'the way back', this is, from abstract to concrete, but that they abandoned any representation of totality and did not question the given notions of reality.

Closing the first part of this volume, Patrick Murray presents a historical timeline of phenomenological critique, from Berkeley and going through Hegel to Marx. He is interested in what he calls 'bad abstractions' and the manners in which they relate to the notion of abstraction in Marx. He finds a second dividing line from Berkeley to Marx, but through Samuel Bailey. Neither Berkeley nor Bailey, even when they criticized political economists for dealing with abstract ideas, saw value as an expression of the social character of wealth. Both got entangled in the bad abstractions generated by the capitalist mode of production. Finally, Murray traces the way in which Marx deals with bad abstractions in philosophy and political economy, concluding with the problem of what would be "abstract" in abstract labor.

The second section presents the problematic methodological and conceptual consequences that this trope produces within and from Marx's oeuvre. The aforementioned new readings allow us to underscore that the specific social form of a generalized commodity-producing society objectifies a kind of abstraction that cannot be limited any longer, in its critical exposition, to a mental process or a merely categorical one, nor should it be confused with the methodological needs of the critique of political

economy. They are, instead, abstract processes that social individuals themselves perform and reproduce under the parameters of specific historical relations and that, in Alfred Sohn-Rethel's words, 'have the shape of thought'. The form commodity, the form value, the form capital, the form money are all abstractions that operate in the objectivity of the social system and tend to naturalize economic phenomena under the continuous and central process of the historical social relations that reproduce them. Warner Bonefeld's chapter in this volume addresses the basic features of these economic forms as objective phenomena of capitalist society and the specific role of criticism regarding the treatment of these forms: 'Rather, what appears in society as economic objectivity is Men in their social relations. That is, the so-called economic laws of development express the social nature of a definite form of social relations. The question of 'capital' thus becomes a question about the social relationship between persons expressed as a relationship between economic things, that is, real economic abstractions.'

It is an abstraction that, given the centrality of its objective condition in the social form, tends to compel the behavior of social individuals beyond their immediate conscious processes, and that orientates, in systemic terms, the sense of the social praxis of said individuals toward the reproduction of such concealed social form. The condition for the naturalization of the economic phenomena presented in this social form resides in forgetting social relations, which are abstracted by the abstraction implied in the commodity in value, capital and money. Bonefeld's contribution underscores that the so-called New Reading of Marx anticipated by Sohn-Rethel's and Adorno's attempt to expand the critique of political economy into a social critical theory had the virtue of 'revealing social relations in the shape of things as inverted forms of defined social relations'. Therefore, these problems require a reflection about the theoretical and methodological procedures specific to the critique of these forms. If the categories of political economy, to the extent to which they are presented as true hypostasis of the forms of the social system, provide a gate toward an explanation of how such social system was genetically produced and is reproduced. The devising of a coherent series of categories by Marx in his critique of political economy, followed, in a certain manner, by Sohn-Rethel and Adorno's projects, are equal, in Alfred Schmidt's words, to a true 'conceptualized praxis (begriffene Praxis) of the capitalist social relations in the form of real economic abstractions'. The methodological aspect of the theory must therefore take into consideration the nature of

the thing to be addressed and consequently the theoretical abstractions that correspond to that critique pursue the abstracting logical course of the real contained in the categories of political economy to later surpass it.

Nonetheless, if we can recognize in Marx's oeuvre the presence of a radical change in relation to the philosophical tradition, the inherited ontology, and especially the hardened common sense which locates in the genetic and reproductive praxic process of the social system abstractions that do not correspond solely to thought, our discussion would now be centered in the intratheoretical web of the critical apparatus, that is which are the moments in Marx's oeuvre where this change redirects the critique and how the questions of method are articulated in the oeuvre regarding the variations implied in dealing with abstractions whose substance is located in social praxis. Strongly rooted in the tradition of Althusserian readings of Capital, Jacques Bidet's contribution puts forth a critique of the positions which tend to connect the centrality of the concept of abstract work with the objectivity of the real abstraction, to the extent to which the mercantile character of capitalist social relations would be the source of the abstract character of labor. In this regard, Bidet's contribution questions both Moishe Poston's seminal *Time, Labor and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* as well as the readings of the so-called 'esoteric school' started by Georg Backhaus and continued in the current of the *Neue Kritik*, whose main exponent is Christopher Arthur. Bidet argues that these theses 'confuse the notions of abstraction, abstract labor and real abstraction', and that such confusion also extends to 'the set of the structural, historical, and political analyses it inspires'. The distinction by Althusser, in his reading of Marx, between the thought-concrete and the real-concrete, offers, according to Bidet, the possibility of seeking a distinction between the separation of two analytic registers: 'theoretical abstraction' and 'real abstraction'. In the Marxian method, the former helps understand the latter. The metastructural dimension of the mercantile society analyzed by Marx in a logical register, thus, can only be perceived once the structure of exploitation has become consistent. The apparent paradox faced here by theory leads to a confusion between an abstraction which remains, in principle, at a theoretical level, and another one which signals the historical and real centrality of the forms of abstract labor in its objectivity.

Therefore, our aim is to elucidate on the one hand the theoretical principles under which Marx's critique has explored how real abstractions frame the permanent reproduction of the social system and on the other,

when and to what extent these specific abstractions of capitalist mercantile production, in its process of praxic generalization, allowed their theoretical elucidation. Mauricio Vieira Martins's contribution in this volume addresses this. By considering the general inclusion of labor power within the circuit of exchanges and the generalization of the form of money as both conditions required for 'subsuming the meaning of production as a whole', he provides the theoretical keys of Marx's reasoning to establish an explanation which bridges the gap between the objective genetic process of consolidation of certain historical production relations and the conditions, both objective and subjective, for their elucidation. Since this process consolidated concurrently to Marx's life and oeuvre, it is also key to elucidate the differences within the oeuvre itself with regard to the conditions which allowed Marx to arrive at a critical reflection underpinned by a praxistic conception of abstraction. Accordingly, these transformations within theory are not exempt of a 'tense articulation' between the so-called 'systematic plan of analysis (at the highest level of abstraction) and the historical approach (that points to the unavoidable presence of the social classes and their conflict)'. The verification, in Marx's later works, of the notion of abstraction in actu derived from the general entrapment by the form of value of the diversity of concrete labor and its subsequent influence on phenomena of social consciousness allow Vieira Martins to state that, at that moment, Marx would have been able to demonstrate that 'abstract processes (which, in the specific sense we here give evidence of) also generate uninterrupted effects on reality'.

If we can therefore say that the verification of abstractive forms operates in the sphere of the real before operating in the forms of consciousness and historically conditions their heuristic scope of the latter, and if this verification reaches the tensions in Marx's own oeuvre, the study of the problem of real abstraction should avoid the temptation to conceive it merely as a question circumscribed to the epistemological dimension, but also extend it to the nature of social theory as necessary for the theoretical treatment of capitalist modernity and the necessary conceptual tools to overcome it. Here as well, in the conceptual sphere, we encounter intratheoretical and extratheoretical consequences due to the verification of the real character of systemic abstractive phenomena. The contributions of Alberto Bonnet, Cristián Sucksdorf and Ingo Elbe carry out this search for conceptual accuracy within and out with Marx's oeuvre.

Bonnet unwinds the dense variability of the concept of 'form' in Marx. Freed from the idealist reduction of the form, both in the Aristotelian

tradition, where the concept of form as related to matter is kept at a level which is too broad to characterize specific historical forms, and in its Hegelian counterpart, which substantializes the reductive action of consciousness and limits matter to a concept of fixed and ensemblistic-identitary (i.e. ensidic) nature, Marx's notion of form, centered in the concept of historical relations of production, dynamically outlines a divided materiality, articulated among social relations, and a socially mediated conception of nature. In consequence, if matter in its double relational condition always exceeds a certain historical form, it is convenient to set forth a concept of form that is deployed, in relation to that contradictory materiality, as a form of process. Capitalist forms do not imply a dynamics of process in their origin and in their point of structuring, but do imply a dynamics of process in their ongoing reproduction. Stripped of its speculative surface, in Marx's notion of form there are modes of existence whose contradiction with the metabolisms of matter they grasp justify their dialectic treatment. From here, Bonnet attempts to think about abstraction in Marx's oeuvre as an attribute of capitalist forms in social relations, connection that links this attribute to the concepts of fetishism and abstract work. This reasoning results in the following statement: 'This relation between concept and object must now be specified in the light of distinction between mental abstraction and real abstraction. All concept remains, naturally, the result of a process of mental abstraction. But there is a specificity when this subjective process of abstraction has as its counterpart a process of objective abstraction given that, in such case, the former may aspire to reproduce the latter in thought'. The specificity of the concept of form in Marx, explicit in its dialectic treatment, states the scope and the objectives of the critique: '[T]he concept of form explains the way in which social relations in capitalist society exist. And, in this way, from the point of view of the anti-capitalist critique, it allows us to precise the objectives of such critique. This, in itself, is already decisive. Marx himself dedicated innumerable pages to argue against other socialists of his time this matter of the objectives an anti-capitalist critique should have'.

Social theory had to pay a hefty price for the Hegelian concept of contradiction to earn the right to be a source of truth in process and to cease to be equated with falsehood and rejection. All dynamics of internal contradictions in social life were subsumed to a resolution whose command, eventually, corresponds to thought. In his contribution, Cristián Sucksdorf attempts to demonstrate the manner in which Marx's thought distances itself from these two versions of contradiction typical of the ontology

inherited from our philosophical traditions. This maneuver is, in turn, elusive with regard to the idealist matrix with which said ontology constructed the duality of idealism and materialism. With a specific utilization of Foucaultian epistemology, centered in the notion of discourse, Sukdorf attempts to prove that Marx expanded the field of the real, regarding philosophical tradition, to ‘include in it the meaning as articulation of the bodies’. If Marx deals mainly with an investigation related to the specific articulation between bodies and representations in capitalist society, the question is, then, ‘to account for the differential ways in which representations—the meaning—constitute real practices and thus modify the bodies and their interrelations, but also, how that meaning forms in the active life—in actual, concrete practices—of the many interrelated bodies’. The real contradiction—bound to practices whose meaning for mercantile society is, in principle, potency—is not a contradiction residing within the concept or a contradiction in general. It is instead the specific support, namely the source, of the abstractions of a historical intertwining between bodies and representations. In this sense, contradiction is also an attribute of the universalization of dynamics in a social system based on abstract forms of sociability. The cellular form of this contradiction, which inoculates into real life its abstracting poison, is on the one hand the double contradictory condition within its body of the commodity as use value, that is as the product of concrete labor, and as value, that is as the product of abstract labor; and, on the other, that in the horizon of representation, we deal with physical and metaphysical, sensible and suprasensible, individual and universal, private and social elements as we appreciate its reproductive generalization. The isomorphism in the experience of subjects, with its unsolvable duality in the field of capitalist relations present in the body of the commodity, locates the subjective aspect of abstract thought in consistency with the hidden hardness of the contradiction that subtends it. This isomorphism of the forms of consciousness with the contradictory and hidden nature of the commodity locates Marx’s analysis of the commodity in a place that overcomes inherited philosophical dualities.

Ingo Elbe’s text addresses the risk of Lukacs’s drift toward idealism due to the lack of systematization of the Marxian concept of reification in his oeuvre. The fact that Lukacs treated several topics present in Marx overlooking the importance of this key concept ‘had fatal consequences for the entire history of the reception of the term, since this conceptual diffuseness, paired with a Hegelian metaphysics of spirit, led to an idealist (all social interrelations are mental things) and irrational social ontology

(social interrelations under capitalism are mental things)'. The rescue of the concept of reification in Marx's oeuvre thus requires a new intratheoretical order of the concepts which may be articulated with reification as a consequence of the real character of abstraction. Within this conceptual field, which is also a problematic trope, Elbe addresses first 'the real reification and autonomous status of social relations in capitalism', which is related to the semantic variations of the concept of alienation in Marx, and second the need to distinguish that real reification from 'the ideological reification (fetishization, mystification) of these relations as natural characteristics of things or universal-historical social patterns'. Here the concept of fetishism becomes significant. In Marx's later works, the sense of the concept of alienation, explained in earlier works by the domination of the thing or of wealth as a completely extraneous power, gets more elaborate and is deciphered from the starting point of abstract work, whose condition of possibility is given by the process of autonomization of the social form of labor. In this manner, 'reification proves to be a form of alienation specific to capitalism', given that 'the form of wealth, value, is constituted as a specific social relationship of validity through initial conditions structured by a private division of labor, and the social recognition of products of labor through the mediation of exchange'. Nonetheless, in his later works, the concept of reification also encompasses the cognitive phenomena of the fetishization process, which connects the two phenomenic instances, organically connected, at which Marx aims his critique: the naturalization of social relations caused by the 'objectification and autonomization of the social nexus' and crystallized in the categories of political economy, and, through this, 'the critique of this objectification and autonomization of relations itself'.

Another problem is the risk of dispersion in the critique, both conceptually and thematically, produced by, on the one hand, the so-called New Reading of Marx with regard to the reconstruction of the critique of political economy and their particular interest in the phenomena of real abstraction in their systematization and reconstruction of the Marxian theory of value and, on the other hand, other readings of real abstraction as a field of application for the interpretation of phenomena linked to social domination and the reproduction and accumulation of capital in race, gender and nature. Chris O'Kane's contribution attempts to encompass the conceptual field from these two areas of theoretical renewal and the conceptual scales devoted to the problem of real abstraction in the work of Sohn-Rethel, Theodore Adorno and Henri Lefebvre. This contribution

also focuses on two topics which are key to our purpose: first, the epistemological consequences for the type of critical social theory which includes in its several fields of application the fact of conceiving phenomena as objective when they are of an abstract nature, and second the considerable differentiation between an abstraction which corresponds to the objective occurrence of social phenomena and another one which corresponds to the critical exercise which chases such social phenomena.

The tight relation between the categories of political economy revealed by Marx and the reconstruction of the contextual field category by category which he undertakes pose the question of the effectiveness of the ‘method’ in *A Critique of Political Economy*. This relation is surrounded by an objectivity whose specific historical condition is to conceal its substance. The Marxian method, therefore, operates as a path of genetic reconstruction of said concealments, which requires the exercise of abstraction itself to fulfill the passage from the abstract to the concrete. As it proceeds, it accounts for the systemic causes by means of which political economy produced a process of resubjectivation of the general historical categories in the mode of production. Wolfgang Fitz Haug’s contribution reconstructs the saga of the reconstruction the workings of political economy from outside until the question which political economy itself had not put forth is revealed: Why does material content historically adopt the form of value? At the same time, this reconstruction of the categorical array of political economy poses the question of why the latter has stopped reasoning before stating this issue. A central aspect of Fitz Haug’s contribution consists of signaling that this process of pursuing the nature of things themselves through hardened categories is present in Marx since the critique to Feuerbach. Another central aspect of his analysis consists of highlighting that the genetics intrinsic to the form of value requires an abstraction, in principle, of the effective exchange, in order to demonstrate that this is its condition of possibility. The connection between both aspects takes place in the fundamental conclusion for social theory that genetic and historical explanations are not the same, because in the categorical subjectification typical of the unveiling of political economy there is a kind of abstraction equivalent to the way in which value works in the concrete sphere of the social system. Therefore, ‘the abstraction of the category “labor” [is] not to be confused with the concept of “abstract labor”’, since here ‘[t]he truth of the abstraction here stands for the fact that—as Adorno says in the appropriate context—it clings to (schmigtsich an) a practical reality’. Yet, if the simple form of value proceeds toward the

more complex forms in the abstract sphere, always in relation to but separated from the continuous phenomenon of exchange, the ‘interest in exchanges’ always presents a mercantile aesthetics (presented here as the conceptual innovation of the Haug’s contribution) which can only stand on the other leg of the contradiction intrinsic to the commodity: the use value of things. A mercantile aesthetics which creates images of use value becomes the condition that underpins exchange, as a consequence of goods being compelled to be valued as commodities. If this is the case, then, ‘[t]he abstraction from use value manifests itself as the aesthetic promise of use value and leads to the formation of aesthetic monopolies of use value. In short: real abstraction appears here as illusory concreteness for the purchasing masses’.

Oliver Schlaudt and Peter McLaughlin’s chapter deals with the epistemological implications of real abstraction. Thinking of the problem as a conceptual field for application, the authors attempt to derive the notion to the field of the natural sciences, in particular, to an epistemology of physics rooted in the history of technology, a sphere where there are extensive experiences of the operation of practical abstraction. Taking into consideration that the kind of abstraction analyzed by Sohn-Rethel in exchange sphere points out to a ‘special’ kind of real abstraction from a ‘more general’ set of practical abstractions, the authors highlight a general morphology of abstraction in technological experience that proceeds by ‘analogous types of abstractions’. At stake here is Sohn-Rethel’s assumption that the experience of exchange defines the general form of science, as it provides, by means of mimetic procedures which remain hidden, a base of experience for the emergence of the categorical base of Kantian subjectivism. According to Schlaudt and McLaughlin, by resorting to the history of technology, it is possible to grasp a more significant experience in these procedures, based on the diversification of “technical devices” which put to different uses resulted in applied abstractive practices. It is stated that when Marx undertakes the genetic explanation of value, he also proceeds with diverse elements that can be made analogous for different ends. The aim of Schlaudt and McLaughlin is ‘to discuss the extent to which abstraction, understood in this way, can be regarded as a common phenomenon in the history of science, and thus as a useful key to concept formation in the science’.

Finally, the implications in the substratum of social domination that these forms of abstraction imply regarding the systemic dynamics of the commodity-producing society in relation to the homogenization of socialized life and

its behavioral regularities, urge the organizational forms of anti-capitalist resistance to consider new forms of revolutionary sociability that contemplates the cracks in the coercive features spread by such socialization. The problem of time connected to the process of valorization of capital and to abstract labor becomes a key issue in the diagnostics of advanced capitalism regarding the correlation between practical phenomena and the concepts of temporality by which social individuals act. Sergio Tischler's stimulating work, which closes our volume, rises to the twofold theoretical challenge of, on the one hand, problematizing the implications of this 'abstract time' of capital and its consequences for the dynamics of socialization, both in modern capitalist societies and in the experiences of domination of time in the so-called 'really existing socialisms' and, on the other, presenting the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) and the conformation of Councils of Good Government as experiences whose organizational logic in establishing authorities and conforming primary relations in social life breaks away from the abstracting principles of mercantile temporality. In this practical and rebellious experience, there is an applied reading of the wider problem of real abstraction as a conceptual field in Marx's oeuvre, which launches a revision, as a theoretical update to Marxism, of the revolutionary experiences of previous decades in Latin America.

In conclusion, in an extensive set of problems that encompasses from research into the theoretical and practical backgrounds of the theory of real abstraction to the unveiling of its potential effectiveness within the theory of social criticism and the past and present controversies regarding this problem in the reading of Marx's oeuvre and Marxism, this volume proposes a wide and open outline for the problem of our contemporary dominating forms of socialization, with abstraction as a main force. They were envisioned in a work that today, after relatively few years and for the first time, has been systematized and made accessible.

This Introduction was translated by Andrés Pacheco and Renata Farías.

NOTES

1. Perhaps it is Michael Postone's (1993) already classic work that has most emphasized his criticism of transhistoric planks in Marx's work.
2. This group is part of the 'wertkritik' (value criticism) movement, and publishes a magazine of the same name, *Krisis*, in the German language. Its main references are known: Robert Kurz, Roswitha Scholz, Ernst Lohoff, Franz Schandl, Norbert Trenkle y Claus-Peter Ortlieb.

3. The critical–theoretical lineage refers to thinkers who develop their New reading of Marx within the tradition of critical theory and includes not only students of Adorno but thinkers in other critical Marxist traditions, such as Open Marxism. This distinguishes them from others who work within this theoretical discourse, such as Michael Heinrich (2004) and Chris Arthur (2004), who are influenced by the work of Backhaus (1997), Reichelt (2007), etc. but do not see their attempts to reconstruct the critique of political economy as part of the critical theoretical tradition.
4. The influence of the Logic of Hegel in relation to Capital, has been accentuated mainly by the proposals of the New Dialectic, especially by Chris Arthur (2004), for a review Moseley and Smith (2014).

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PART I

Reconstructing the Problem of Real
Abstraction



Value Form and Abstract Labor in Marx: A Critical Review of Alfred Sohn-Rethel's Notion of 'Real Abstraction'

John Milios

MARX'S CONCEPTS OF VALUE, VALUE FORM AND ABSTRACT LABOR

The Marxist concept of value is radically different from the Ricardian concept of value as 'labor expended'. Unlike the Ricardian theory of value, the Marxist theory of value is a *monetary theory*. In the Marxist system, the value of a commodity cannot be defined in isolation, but *exclusively in relation to all other commodities*, in the process of exchange. In this relation of exchange, value is materialized in money. The essential feature of the 'market economy' (of capitalism) is thus not simply commodity exchange but monetary circulation and money. Barter is for Marx non-existing, as all exchange transactions are made up of separate acts of exchange of commodities with money.

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In capitalism, each commodity is produced not as a mere useful thing, that is a use value, but as a bearer of value, a thing carrying a price. Even before entering the market, each ‘product’ potentially carries a price, which though will be realized (validated) in the exchange process. Prices are thus determined in the process of capitalist production, that is in a historically unique process of (capitalist) production-for-the-exchange-and-for-profit, a process which unites immediate production with circulation.

Money is thus conceived as *the adequate form of appearance of both value and capital*. According to Marx’s analysis, it is the material embodiment of *abstract and therefore equal human labor*, which the capitalist appropriates, and which in the framework of capitalist relations of exploitation is accumulated and functions as a ‘self-valourising value’. This point requires, though, further elaboration.

That ‘wealth’, that is to say everything that is useful, is mostly a product of labor applies not only to capitalism, but also to every mode of production. Every mode of production presupposes the *worker–producer* and his (her) particular relationship with the *means of production*, from which can be deciphered the particular structural characteristics of the community in which that mode of production is predominant. However, as stressed by Marx on the very first page of *Capital*, it is only in ‘those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails’, that wealth ‘presents itself as “an immense accumulation of commodities”’ (Marx 1990: 125).¹ It is thus obvious that it is not because it is a product of labor that wealth is a commodity, but because this labor is carried out within the framework of certain social relations of production and so is subjected to the standardization and uniformity that is inherent in these relations of production. *Value* is a manifestation of the structural characteristics of the capitalist mode of production and not a manifestation of labor in general.

It is therefore clear that Marx conceived of value as a historically specific *social relation*: Value is the ‘property’ that products of labor acquire in capitalism, a property which is actualized in the market, through the exchangeability of any product of labor with any other, that is through their character as commodities bearing a specific (monetary) price on the market. From the *Grundrisse* (1857–1858),² to *Capital* (1867),³ Marx insisted that value is an expression of relations exclusively characteristic of the capitalist mode of production. Thus, wherever in his work he introduces the concept of ‘generalised commodity production’ (such as in the first section of the first volume of *Capital*) so as to comprehend value, in reality he is shaping a preliminary intellectual construct (which to some

extent corresponds to the superficial ‘visible reality’ of the capitalist economy), which will help him to come to grips with capitalist production, and subsequently construct his concept of it. In 1858–1859 he wrote: ‘The simple circulation is mainly an abstract sphere of the bourgeois overall production process, which manifests itself through its own determinations as a trend, a mere form of appearance of a deeper process which lies behind it, and equally results from it but also produces it—the industrial capital’ (MEGA II.2 1980: 68–69).

Marx approaches the problem of value creating labor by way of the question of commensurability. Put in another way, where Classical Political Economy believed that it was giving a conclusive answer (qualitatively different objects—use values—are rendered economically commensurate—exchangeable—because they are all products of labor), Marx simply sees a question which has to be answered: How and why can qualitatively different kinds of labor be made equivalents? Marx clearly questions the classical notion of ‘equal’ labor: ‘Let us suppose that one ounce of gold, one ton of iron, one quarter of wheat and twenty yards of silk are exchange-values of equal magnitude [...] But digging gold, mining iron, cultivating wheat and weaving silk are qualitatively different kinds of labour. In fact, what appears objectively as diversity of the use-values, appears, when looked at dynamically, as diversity of the activities which produce those use-values’ (Marx 1981: 29).

For the riddle of the equivalence of different kinds of labor to be solved, what must be comprehended is the *social character of labour under capitalism*: The capitalist organization of production and the resultant social division of labor is underpinned by the direct (institutional) independence of each individual producer (capitalist) from all the others. Nevertheless, all these individual productive procedures are linked indirectly between themselves through the mechanism of the market, since each of them produces not for himself or for the ‘community’ but for exchange on the market, with the purpose of acquiring a profit not lower than the average profit of the economy. This procedure imposes an increasing social (capitalistic) uniformity on all individual productive activities precisely through generalized commodity exchange and competition between individual capitalist production processes (commodity producers).

Marx defines this procedure of social homogenization of individual labor procedures and productive processes through introduction of the term *abstract labor*. Labor *has* a dual nature in the capitalist mode of production—on the one hand, it is concrete labor (labor which produces a

concrete use value, as in any mode of production) and on the other, it is at the same time abstract labor (labor in general), *labor which is from the social viewpoint qualitatively identical*. From this stem the overall commensurability and exchangeability of the products of labor, that is that they are constituted (produced) as commodities: ‘The labour contained in exchange-value is abstract universal social labour, which is brought about by the universal alienation of individual labour’ (Marx 1981: 56–57).

This means that ‘every commodity is *the* commodity which, as a result of the alienation of its particular use-value, must appear as the direct materialisation of universal labour-time’ (Marx 1981: 45).

Put in another way, every commodity attains the social form of general exchangeability, in abstraction from its specific utility or any other characteristic, expressing its value in monetary units. Marx formulates at this point what Alfred Sohn-Rethel defined as the ‘real abstraction’ of the value form. Commenting on the fact that as values commodities carry a monetary name (express themselves in a—potential—quantity of money), Sohn-Rethel correctly stresses: ‘In this capacity money must be vested with an abstractness of the highest level to enable it to serve as the equivalent to every kind of commodity that may appear on the market’ (Sohn-Rethel 1978: 6).⁴

In Vol. 1 of *Capital* (Penguin Classics edition) the analysis of abstract labor takes up no more than seven pages (131–137). Nevertheless, he hastens to declare that he is proud of the formulation of this concept, a declaration the like of which we would probably find no more than once or twice in all the rest of his writings.⁵

Abstract labor does not ‘emerge’ from the concrete, it is not an identity of it: it is the historically specific property of *all* labor under capitalism. Concrete-natural labor as a distinct concept can in no way be reduced to abstract labor or constitute the content of exchange value: Abstract labor is a distinct ‘property’ of *every (concrete) act of labor under the capitalist mode of production*, that is an expression of the particular form of social arrangement that characterizes that (and only that) specific mode of production, irrespective of whether the work in question is simple or more complex and requiring a high degree of specialization.⁶

The problem of social homogenization of labor to which one is referred by the concept of abstract labor is thus different from the problem of ‘quantitative correspondence’ of work of differing degrees of intensity, specialization, and productivity. For one hour of the work of an engineer to be able to correspond (quantitatively) to n hours of the work of an

unskilled laborer, the two types of work must already constitute ‘qualitatively similar’ (i.e. *abstract*) labor.

In conclusion: The products of labor are commodities, values and exchange values, not simply because they are products of labor but because they are products of abstract labor, that is ‘capitalist labor’ (labor which is performed under capitalist conditions, within the framework of the capitalist mode of production), labor creating products-for-exchange-and-for-profit: commodities. Abstract labor produces value-carrying commodities. Value constitutes the relation of general exchangeability of commodities, and is expressed through money—their common measure, which lacks every predicate beyond that of size.

Here it is worth noting two points:

(a) Abstract labor (and consequently ‘abstract labor time’) is not a straightforward (empirically verifiable) property of labor but an ‘abstraction’, that is a social form which expresses the social homogenization of labor in the capitalist mode of production. Marx’s notion of abstract labor renders thus comprehensible this very process of social homogenization of labor *under the capitalist mode of production*: ‘Universal labor-time itself is an abstraction which, as such, does not exist for commodities’ (Marx 1981: 45).

That which empirically exists is merely the specific commodities which are bought and sold on the market (and so exchanged with money).

(b) Abstract labor, as the concept which conveys the specifically social (capitalist) character of the labor process, does not have to do with each separate productive procedure but with the *social interrelation of all* the separate, institutionally unrelated, *capitalist productive processes*, as this interrelation reveals itself in the market-place: ‘Social labour-time exists in these commodities in a latent state, so to speak, and becomes evident only in the course of their exchange [...]. Universal social labour is consequently not a ready-made prerequisite but an emerging result’ (Idem: 45).

These two issues suggest why the whole weight of the analysis must be placed on the *manifestation* of value as *exchange value* (the ‘form of appearance’ of value) and this is where Marx places it: he does not close his analysis of value with the concept of abstract labor but on the contrary devotes by far the greatest part of his analysis (107 of the 120 pages of Part I of Vol. 1 of *Capital*) to the value form, or value as an exchange relation between commodities, and to money.

The price expressing the general exchangeability for any commodity with all others is the sole *objective materialization* (form of appearance) of

value. In *Capital* Marx introduces his readers to these questions through the following phrase:

The reality of the value of commodities differs in this respect from Dame Quickly, that we don't know "where to have it". The value of commodities is the very opposite of the coarse materiality of their substance, not an atom of matter enters into its composition. Turn and examine a single commodity, by itself, as we will, yet in so far as it remains an object of value, it seems impossible to grasp it. [...]. *Value can only manifest itself in the social relation of commodity to commodity.* In fact, we started from exchange-value, or the exchange relation of commodities, in order to get at the value that lies hidden behind it. We must now return to this form under which value first appeared to us. (Marx 1990: 138–139, emphasis added)

Marx's whole analysis makes clear that the notion of *abstract* labor does not mainly refer to a process of subjective or intellectual appropriation of reality (by Marx or any other intellectual), but to an objective process: the formation of an aspect of *the structure of capitalist reality*, the typical configuration of certain elements of this reality. Deciphering this reality is then characteristic of Marx's analysis, which conveys the causal relationships that regulate reality without ever themselves appearing as such in the realm of empirical reality and of appearance, since they do not belong to the tangible entities and phenomena (Marx 1990: 433, 680).

The conclusion that may be inferred from the above theses is that the value of commodities never appears as such, as an immediately perceivable (empirically observable) and thus measurable entity. It finds expression only through the form of its appearance, that is commodity prices. This form of appearance of value does not, as we have argued, relate to each commodity separately, that is to say, it is not a matter of isolated, of *initially mutually independent* expressions of the value of each commodity. The *form* registers the *relationship of exchange* between each commodity and *all other* commodities.

MARX'S METHODOLOGY AND ALFRED SOHN-RETHEL'S NOTION OF 'REAL ABSTRACTION'. A CRITICAL DISCUSSION

As can be inferred from Section I of this chapter, a methodological issue in Vol. I of *Capital*, which must always be taken into account, is that Marx examines the question *what is value* and subsequently *what is money* in the

first three chapters of the first volume of *Capital* before offering a definition of capitalism (the capitalist mode of production—CMP). This method of exposition, aiming at the gradual maturation of concepts, has led certain Marxists to the view that value is not a constituent category of the concept of the CMP but that it gives a preliminary description of a (supposed) historical epoch of commodity production, which preceded capitalism.

As argued above, Marx introduces this concept of generalized commodity production only as an intellectual construct that will help him to approach and then to establish the concept of capitalist production.

In one of his latest texts, Marx himself describes his method as follows:

De prime abord, I do not proceed from ‘concepts,’ hence neither from the ‘concept of value,’ and am therefore in no way concerned to ‘divide’ it. What I proceed from is the simplest social form in which the product of labour presents itself in contemporary society, and this is the ‘commodity.’ This I analyse, initially in the *form in which it appears*. [...] The mere *form* of appearance is not its own *content*. [...] For this reason when analysing the commodity, I do not immediately drag in definitions of ‘capital,’ not even when dealing with the ‘use-value’ of the commodity. Such definitions are bound to be sheer nonsense as long as we have advanced no further than the analysis of the elements of the commodity. (Marx 1881)

To be consistent with Marx’s methodology, one must take into consideration his whole analysis from the commodity to money as the general equivalent, and from there to the notion of capital as a social relation, the circuit of capital, money as the general form of appearance of capital, credit money etc. Otherwise, apart from the detachment of the concept of value from the CMP and its projection to a plethora of ‘commodity’—forms and—modes of production, the introductory reference to value and money ‘in itself’ creates again the illusion that in the first three chapters of the first volume of *Capital* there is (or may be) a conclusive theoretical investigation of the Marxian concepts under question.

It is true that the commodity is the simplest economic form ‘in contemporary society’ (Marx, op.cit.). However, if we restrict our analysis to the first section of Volume I of *Capital*, we will miss reference to the most characteristic commodity of the CMP, the existence of which is also the most significant *presupposition for the generalization of commodity production*: labor-power. Labor power subsumed under capital, that is the capital–wage–labour relation, constitutes the basis of the CMP as such.

The distinguishing feature of the capitalist economy is that all active agents of production are commodity *owners*, because even if they are not commodity *producers* (capitalists), they possess the commodity of labor power. Only under this precondition all products of labor, including, first of all, those that constitute the laborer's remuneration, become commodities, that is goods produced for-exchange-and-for-profit bearing a value which is expressed in monetary units; only under this precondition useful-concrete labor exists also as abstract labor; we may therefore speak about a real abstraction.

It is exactly this point that Alfred Sohn-Rethel misses when he puts forward a notion of *real abstraction* supposedly extending through all the 'ages of commodity production from their beginnings in ancient Greece to the present day' (Sohn-Rethel 1978: 5). He further explains:

This kind of exchange—commodity exchange properly speaking—is the one which is characteristic of Greek antiquity. It leads to a monetary economy and to a system of social synthesis centred on private appropriation.

'Commodities' then answered the Marxian definition as 'products of the labour of private individuals who work independently of each other'. (Sohn-Rethel 1978: 98)

Such analyses, portraying the character of ancient Greek economy and society as a 'market economy', are most often put forward by non-Marxist historians, sociologists or economists. Characteristic is the case of certain economic historians (portrayed as 'modernists', like Edward E. Cohen, Alain Bresson), who challenge the theorizations of Moses I. Finley, Karl Polanyi and others (the so-called 'archaists') on the archaic and 'embedded'-in-polity, pre-capitalist, character of the ancient Greek economy (Milios 2018, Ch. 7). But even John Maynard Keynes argues that capitalism was born in the antiquity! Commenting on 'Ancient Currencies', he writes:

Individualistic capitalism and the practices pertaining to that system were undoubtedly invented in Babylonia [...]. Perhaps the clue to the economic history of Greece from the Homeric period to the fifth century B.C. may be partly found in the gradual adaptation of the primitive economy of the tribes to the individualistic capitalism which they found in Asia Minor in a decadent and confused form but reaching back in its origins and in the experience behind it to a highly developed and complex system of great antiquity. (Keynes 2013: 253–254)

However, each and every version of this problematique stressing a supposed affinity between the economy of ancient Greece and capitalism (as ‘commodity producing economies’) either implicitly or explicitly fully disentangles the notion of capitalism from any connotation or hint of connection with wage-labor. Marx has repeatedly referred to pre-capitalist ‘mobile wealth piled up through usury—especially that practised against landed property—and through mercantile profits’ (Marx 1993: 504), but always in an effort to distinguish it from the capitalist form of ‘mobile wealth’.

But the *mere presence of monetary wealth*, and even the achievement of a kind of supremacy on its part, is in no way sufficient for this *dissolution into capital* to happen. Or else ancient Rome, Byzantium etc. would have ended their history with free labor and capital, or rather begun a new history. There, too, *the dissolution of the old property relations was bound up with development of monetary wealth—of trade* etc. But [...] this dissolution led in fact to the supremacy of the countryside over the city. [...] Capital does not create the objective conditions of labour (Idem: 506–507, emphasis added).

Value and abstract labor are notions pertaining to the capital relation, not to ‘exchange’, the market, or ancient currencies. I will further elaborate on this issue, bringing into the discussion the conclusions of Marxist historical research.

The dominant mode of production in the societies of antiquity was the classic (or patriarchal, as Marx names it) mode of production. In this form of (‘classic’) slavery, the slave-owners were landowners who, however, were *absent from the production process* and conceded the management-supervision of this process to a special category of slaves, ensuring for themselves the surplus appropriation through the extra-economic coercion inherent in the master–slave relationship. Marx cites Aristotle, who writes: ‘Whenever the masters are not compelled to plague themselves with supervision, the overseer assumes *this honour*, while the masters pursue public affairs or philosophy’ (Aristotle, cited by Idem: 509).

This form of exploitation fully separates (manual) work from the ruling class of citizens, who by definition abstain from any form of production, practicing only politics and philosophy in the cities. The prominent Marxist historian of antiquity, G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, emphasizes the fact that ‘the function of slave (and freedman) overseers was essential [...] playing a very important role in the economy, perhaps far more so than has

been generally realized' (de Ste. Croix 1981: 258). Perry Anderson also writes along these lines:

Graeco-Roman Antiquity had always constituted a universe centred on cities. [...] The Graeco-Roman towns were [...], in origin and principle, urban congeries of land-owners. [...] The condition of possibility of this metropolitan grandeur in the absence of municipal industry was the existence of slave-labour in the countryside [...]; the surplus product that provided the fortunes of the possessing class could be extracted without its presence on the land. (Anderson 1974: 19–20, 23, 24)

In ancient societies, apart from the dominant classic slave mode of production, there also existed the following forms and modes of production:

- (a) Simple commodity production of freedmen artisans or farmers (Ste. Croix. 1981: 33).
- (b) Wage-labor, though to a rather limited extent, especially among the poor and in public construction plants.⁷ However, this form of labor was regarded as a form of (temporary) voluntary enslavement, and was generally disdained (Kyrtatas 2002).
- (c) A self-contained exploitative mode of production based on slave labor also existed, which was characterized by the concentration of both the ownership *and* the management-supervision of the means of production in the hands of the slave-owner. Characteristic of this mode of production is that the slave-owner, in nearly all cases a metic, that is a non-citizen, was *present in the production process*, which was production for the market aiming at the appropriation of surplus in monetary form. I have named this non-dominant pre-capitalist mode of production the *money-begetting slave mode of production* (Milios 2018).

In the words of Aristotle, the process has 'no limit to the end it seeks; and the end it seeks is wealth of the sort we have mentioned [...] the mere acquisition of currency [...] all who are engaged in acquisition increase their fund of money without any limit or pause' (cited by Meikle 1995: 59).

Marx clearly differentiates the money-begetting slave mode of production from the classic (or 'patriarchal') slave mode of production (of the absentee slave-owner, who is dissociated from the management of the means of production): on different occasions he repeatedly stresses the

‘transformation of the earlier, more or less patriarchal slavery into a *system of commercial exploitation*’ (Marx 1990: 925, emphasis added). As he explains: ‘In the ancient world, the influence of trade and the development of commercial *capital* always produced the result of a slave economy; or, given a different point of departure, it also meant the transformation of a patriarchal slave system oriented towards the production of the direct means of subsistence into one oriented towards the *production of surplus-value*’ (Marx 1991: 449–450, emphasis added).

In the above citation, Marx uses the terms ‘capital’ and ‘surplus-value’ in a rather loose manner in order to denote the specific difference of surplus appropriation in the framework of the money-begetting slave mode of production.⁸

Dominant mode of production, determining the society’s principal structures, remained the classic slave mode of production: ‘The nature of a given mode of production is decided not according to *who does most of the work of production* but according to the specific *method of surplus appropriation*, the way in which the dominant classes extract their surplus from the producers’ (de Ste. Croix 1984: 107).

The dominant classic slave mode of production assigned both the money-begetting slave mode of production and the simple commodity production to the ‘intermundia’ of society, that is, interstitially, in spaces between the basic social structures: The trading peoples of old existed like the gods of Epicurus in the *intermundia*, or like the Jews in the pores of Polish society (Marx 1991: 447).⁹

Both in ancient Greece and Rome, the non-monetary character of the dominant classic slave mode of production had, as a consequence, as de Ste. Croix explains, that ‘money income cannot be directly equated with income in kind from land for assessment purposes’ (de Ste. Croix 2004: 41).

A manufacturer or trader, even when the use of money became general, would simply not know what his ‘income’ or his ‘profits’ expressed in terms of drachmae were. This is one of the basic facts about the economy of the Greek world (and the Roman world) which many modern historians have entirely overlooked, because they persist, quite unconsciously, in conceiving the ancient economic systems in terms taken over directly from the modern or the medieval world. (Idem: 42–43)

It is clear from the above-presented analysis that the money-begetting slave mode of production is different from the capitalist one, as in the

former the laborer is still bound to the taskmaster by a relation of direct personal dependence, and his individual consumption does not depend directly on monetary market relations. As a consequence, exchange value and money cannot become universal, that is, it cannot become the motivating force in the economy, the capital relation cannot take shape. Pre-capitalist societies ‘follow a different economic logic’, as Ernest Mandel aptly stresses.

It is true that the capitalist mode of production is the only social organization of the economy which implies *generalized* commodity production. It would thus be completely mistaken to consider for example Hellenistic slave society or the classical Islamic Empire—two forms of society with strongly developed petty commodity production, money economy and international trade—as being *ruled* by the ‘law of value’. Commodity production in these pre-capitalist modes of production is intertwined with, and in the last analysis subordinated to, organizations of production (in the first place agricultural production) of a clearly non-capitalist nature, which follow a different economic logic from that which governs exchanges between commodities or the accumulation of capital. (Mandel 1991: 14–15)

I would like to elaborate a bit further on the difference between the two modes of production, since the ‘ancient capitalism’ or ‘ancient market economy’ thesis remains powerful among certain parts of academia.

Scott Meikle reviewed a vast array of literature on the ancient Greek economy and concluded that the low development of *productive* credit in the ancient world constrained the role of money to a medium of circulation and a treasure to be hoarded (Meikle 1995: 147–179). The absence of inclusive capital and labor markets ruled out the possibility of exchange value becoming the regulating principle of the economy.

There were no credit instruments of any kind, and each individual transaction was settled almost always by physical transfers in person, either by the principal himself or by an accredited agent. [...] There was no double-entry bookkeeping; notions of debit and credit were unknown; there was no accounting of debits and credits through strings of transactions to be settled at the end of a period, and there were no settlement days, quarterly or otherwise (Meikle 1995: 160).

The subordination of monetary relations to pre-capitalist structures, and the prevalent position of politics maintained in ancient societies, resulted in economic relations and processes being perceived as issues of politics or ethics. As Dimitris Kyrtatas aptly stresses: ‘The idea of exploita-

tion as a general economic category in human relations was absent in ancient Greek thought. What Aristotle and other authors stressed was domination. [...] [T]opics that we would examine as aspects of the economy, the Greeks examined as aspects of politics and ethics. And instead of seeking profit-maximization, the Greeks were mostly after honour-maximization' (Kyrtatas 2002: 153–154).¹⁰

Concluding my analysis, I may formulate my final result as follows: Sohn-Rethel's notion of real abstraction constitutes an important contribution to Marxist theory of value and the value form. However, its generalization to cover 'ages of commodity production from their beginnings in ancient Greece ...' deprives it of its hermeneutic accuracy.

NOTES

1. 'The specific economic form in which unpaid surplus labour is pumped out of the direct producers determines the relationship of domination and servitude, as this grows directly out of production itself and reacts back on it in turn as a determinant' (Marx 1991: 927).
2. 'The concept of value is entirely peculiar to the most modern economy, since it is the most abstract expression of capital itself and of the production resting on it. In the concept of value, its secret is betrayed [...]. The economic concept of value does not occur in antiquity' (Marx 1993: 776 ff.).
3. '*The value form of the product of labour* is the most abstract, but also the *most general form* of the bourgeois mode of production as a particular kind of social production of a historical and transitory character' (Marx 1990: 174).
4. As Christopher Arthur writes: 'What is extraordinary about Sohn-Rethel is that he shows that social abstraction occurs as a result of the practical action of exchangers and obtains with objective validity regardless of whether they are aware of it' (Arthur 2010: 1).
5. 'I was the first to point out and examine critically this twofold nature of the labour contained in commodities' (Marx 1990: 132).
6. A characteristic instance is that of Rosdolsky. In his book *The Making of Marx's Capital*, which had a significant influence on post-World War II Marxist theoretical analysis, he maintains that decline from the 'craftsmanship' of the pre-capitalist artisan led to concrete labor becoming 'abstract labor'. He writes: 'Marx accepted the thesis of Ricardo, which is confirmed by the workings of the market, that what is involved is a reduction of specialised labour to unspecialised' (Rosdolsky 1969: 609. Also see Rosdolsky 1977: 510 ff.).
7. 'By the end of the fifth century, as we know from the Erechtheum accounts, wage rates of one drachma per day were common. The daily pay of sailors

- in the fleet was also between one drachma per day [...] and half a drachma [...] and the daily pay of dicasts was half a drachma from 425 onwards' (de Ste. Croix 2004: 43). 'The poorer women of Athens and, presumably, of other cities also worked for wages' (Kyrtatas 2011: 105).
8. In the *Grundrisse* Marx makes clear that he refers to economic forms which function 'not as themselves forms of capital, but as earlier forms of wealth, as presuppositions for capital' (Marx 1993: 504).
 9. In the antiquity, 'no single statesman is known to have been a practising merchant, and no merchant is known to have played a prominent part in politics, even at Athens. The merchants were not all [...] both non-citizens and men of little or no property; but [...] their influence on politics, as merchants, was certainly infinitesimal' (de Ste. Croix 2004: 356).
 10. Karl Marx has also stressed this view: 'Do we never find in antiquity an inquiry into which form of landed property etc. is the most productive, creates the greatest wealth? Wealth does not appear as the aim of production, although Cato may well investigate which manner of cultivating a field brings the greatest rewards, and Brutus may even lend out his money at the best rates of interest. The question is always which mode of property creates the best citizens' (Marx 1993: 487).

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CHAPTER 3

Money as a Practical Abstraction: From Feuerbach to Marx Through Hess (1841–1844)

Pablo Nocera

INTRODUCTION

By the end of 1841, a young Engels irascibly contested, under a pseudonym and from the pages of the *Telegraph für Deutschland*, the attempt by an old Schelling—with the royal support of Frederick William IV of Prussia—to give an end to the menace that Hegelian philosophy represented to the state and to the manner in which it was growing at the time within a group of radical epigones. The so-called *positive philosophy* that Schelling presented in his first Berlin lecture seemed to offer, from the point of view of Marx’s future companion, only an update to the previous works that, beyond their clear intention to be old-fashioned, were not able to affect the power of Hegelianism and its philosophy of *negativity*. Such contestation was replicated diversely in an auditorium full of Hegelians, including the young Søren Kierkegaard, Mijail Bakunin and Arnold Ruge. Even though it was questioned because of the political context in which it emerged, Schelling’s position made visible a distrust that a young

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Hegelianism would start to elaborate within the following five years. The practical results emerging from the theoretical power of Hegel's dialectics were being made evident in a conservative political horizon. The return to Fichte by referents such as von Cieszkowski and Moses Hess served as warning that praxis had been gradually devaluated, and that thought was being favored as a superior activity, making it impossible for German philosophy to acquire a practical concretion that, in France and Great Britain, had been embodied in respective revolutionary processes.

This chapter explores the notion of *abstraction* in the brief, prolific course in which the young Hegelian heritage deploys it, to a great extent, as a true detachment from the legacy of its master. The purpose of this chapter is, in particular, to address the initial uses by Feuerbach as an analytical support of his critique of the forms of alienation, to explore later the statements by a young Marx in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844, but noting between both positions a specificity not always properly appreciated. It is well known that, for Feuerbach, alienation is a denunciation nurtured by a critique of religion and (Hegelian) philosophy, thus providing an analytical matrix that can very well be projected to the state and to private property, with an emphasis on labor. This was the exercise consummated by Marx during those years. Nonetheless, a more careful reading makes evident the importance of the reflection by Moses Hess as an impulse for this displacement, a sample of which can be traced to the pages of a brief text entitled *Über das Geldwesen* (The Essence of Money). Specifically, we attempt to look at the reasons for Feuerbach to invoke the notion of *abstraction* and the manners in which he mentions it to account for alienation, in order to later expose the appropriations and displacements offered by Hess' exploration. This journey gives way to a reflection about the senses in which Marx uses the term in an early analysis of money, as they not only directly set forth his position but also help us to explore an early reflection about a form of social abstraction that deploys a logic of exchange and whose realization only materializes in the dynamism of a central aspect of the organizations of capitalist forms of production.

FEUERBACH AND *ABSTRACTION* AS ALIENATION
IN THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

The original relation of Feuerbach as Hegel's disciple got colder throughout the 1830s. By 1839, his differences with Hegel got increasingly tangible, gradually encompassing not only his conception of philosophy but also Christianity. With the publication, in the same year, of *Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy*, the differences would become explicit in an essential aspect: the manner in which Feuerbach analyzes the division between philosophical speculation and the sensible world. The first differences are suspicious of the Hegel of the initial statements of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.¹ Philosophy's end is displaced toward the knowledge of nature as a fundamental point in reality. This makes necessary a strengthening of a science of the real, not as the activity of thought, but as something concrete and sensible. Feuerbach's program of a critique is reinforced by an appeal to an inversion of Hegel's assumptions. Nature becomes the center of reflection, and it is accessed with a clear intention to avoid a Hegelian 'fall' in its consideration as a mere degraded counterpart of an absolute idea. Nature considered in its immediacy as independent of consciousness, as an empirical reality that does not go against the sovereignty of the subject, requires a revision of the anthropological foundations of German idealism, at least in the version deployed by Hegel. On the other hand, Feuerbach stands for ways of thinking, which would set humanity free from all forms in which the products of reason and of practice place it in contradiction with sensible reality. This critical program would take a more significant power since 1841, with the publication of *The Essence of Christianity*.

The book published by Wigand placed him as a leader within the young Hegelianism. The power of the critique included in this text provided a true matrix that served as a platform for others to state a denunciation of existing social conditions, beyond the boundaries of a circumscribed German world, and looking at Europe as a whole. The core of this text may be summarized as the need of an anthropological reduction of Christian theology. It is related, precisely, to providing a human justification to that which has lost it in an inversion of reality; in other words, to invert an inversion by Christian religion when it placed God as subject and man as a predicate of divinity. Although 'alienation', as a term, does not appear frequently in this text—as it would in two brief texts commented below—it summarizes precisely the sense of the denunciation in the

critique: man has been estranged in the Christian god, and it only subjects itself to its own estrangement: ‘Religion is the division [*Entzweiung*] of man from himself; he considers God as a being opposed to him. God is not man, man is not God [...] In religion, man objectivizes his secret essence. It is therefore necessary to demonstrate that this opposition, this division between God and man with which religion begins is a division between man and his own essence’ (Feuerbach 1960: 41/tr. 1995: 85). At a distance from Hegelian statements, religion is far from being a mediation that serves to reach infinity. Rather, as an expression of human inversion, of an essence which is not recognized, man as a *generic essence* [*Gattungswesen*] is estranged from his condition, placing in the figure of a deity the whole potential to which he is subsumed and does not recognize as his own: ‘The *absolute* being, the God of man, is *his own* essence. The power that the *object* [*Gegenstandes*] has over him is, therefore, the power of *his own essence*’ (Feuerbach 1960: 6/tr. 1995: 57).

Man’s alienation implies that this reality in which he is trapped is unknown. Feuerbach’s arguments are focused on the relation between man and God as a relation between subject and predicate: the subject is the condensation of all its predicates. If the predicate is true of the subject, it is possible to understand why the figure of God can only be a human creation. The predicates attributed to the deity are only human characteristics brought to their ultimate expression, therefore, ‘[...] if the divine predicates are determinations of the human essence, their subject would also be a human being’ (Feuerbach 1960: 30/tr. 1995: 76). The manner in which Feuerbach conceives the division (i.e. alienation) does not imply—as opposed to a Hegelian perspective—a provisional moment that projects, inevitably, a reconciliation in experience. Opposed to Hegel, for whom experience as a departure from the self (a loss of the self) constitutes a precondition for a richer formative process in the subject’s constitution, for Feuerbach alienation implies a negative process, a loss, something close to straying, which departs from the potency of negativity circumscribed by the master’s statement. This estrangement is embodied in the generic condition. The mantle of religion ends up hiding, under the divinity, the original human condition: ‘Man—this is the mystery of religion—objectivizes his essence and becomes in turn an object of this objective being, transformed into a subject, into a person; he is thought as an object of an object, as an object of another being’ (Feuerbach 1960: 37/tr. 1995: 80). Once the estrangement is consummated, religion cannot be the space of containment of collective life. The *generic essence* may

overcome this condition in the relation with another human being expressed in an effective, real form. For this, it is necessary to understand that ‘God is man’s own and subjective essence, separated and unstated; therefore, he cannot act by himself, all goodness comes from God. The more subjective and human God is, the more man estranges his own subjectivity, his own humanity, because God is, in and by himself, his alienated self that is simultaneously recovered’ (Feuerbach 1960: 38/tr. 1995: 81). Resuming on the idea of reason (understanding) and love, addressed in previous works as a characteristic double in the human, Feuerbach thinks about human life as the expression of love. As a material sample of the relation between men, love appears as the earthly/individual link in which the bodily nature of the human is expressed. Together with understanding, love allows that the relation between the individual and their peers be expressed as any human relation in the connection between the self and an other. In both dimensions, there is an effective possibility of relations relevant to the *Gattungswesen*. The self is the repository of understanding and the other claims love. In both cases, in each of them and in their relation, Feuerbach makes a conciliation between the two to provide a foundation for the idea of community.²

The reach and the projection of these diatribes are increased during subsequent years, when in *Provisional Theses for the Reformation of Philosophy* (1842) and in *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* (1843), Feuerbach points out that the critique to Christianity is extensible, by analogy, to Hegelian philosophy as a whole. Following on the same arguments, the author begins with the assumption that Hegelian philosophy behaves, ultimately, as a ‘rationalized theology’.³ Unlike the critique of Christianity, here, the author would frequently underscore how estrangement can also be expressed—in the scope of thought where philosophy thrives—as an *abstraction*. This displacement is very suggestive, because, although Feuerbach does not let go of the idea of a division, in these brief works, the concept is expanded to make it evident that the natural (sensible) dimension of humanity is consummated by estrangement through these acts of abstraction.⁴ The critique to Hegel points out again toward *phenomenology*. Sensible certainty is an experience only reflected from a theoretical standpoint. The question about the being, states Feuerbach, is a *practical* one, in which our being is involved in terms of life or death. The *practical standpoint* reclaimed by the author as an alternative to Hegelian abstraction is ‘the standpoint of eating and drinking’ (Feuerbach 1959: 288/tr. 1976: 92).

The author is aware that negativity, in Hegelian speculation, saves an activity which makes the subject stand sovereign against the object. For Hegel, abstraction was reprehensible if it did not go beyond a mere provisional limit of understanding. Nonetheless, the warning in the *Theses* is that the negative (active) move in thought is reproduced only in speculation, consummating another form of abstraction. It is not by chance that, in these same pages, Feuerbach ends up asking, with all the connotations implied in Hegel: ‘What is real? How is thought realized?’ To this, he tersely replies: ‘The realization of thought means that thought is denied, it stops being mere thought. But, what is then this non-thought, this something different than thought? The sensible. That thought is realized means, according to this, that it becomes an *object* to the *senses*. The *reality of the idea* is, thus, *sensibility* [...]’ (Feuerbach 1959: 295/tr. 1976: 99). In general terms, abstraction as a specificity of estrangement, implies not acknowledging the natural dimension, which operates as a material basis in any speculative position. For Feuerbach in particular, this reference is given by nature. If philosophy loses touch with ‘everything which is not philosophy’ before philosophizing, it is bound to translate its undertakings into pure estrangement.⁵ Feuerbach’s naturalism, as an original expression of a materialism with evident issues—as pointed out by Marx a few years later—is conclusively defined when he recognizes that ‘[t]he true relation between thought and being is only the following: *a being is a subject, and a thought is a predicate*’ (Feuerbach 1959: 239/tr. 1976: 37).

Feuerbach’s critique speaks for itself. A questioning of Christian theology linked to a questioning of Hegelian philosophy is due not only to a device by means of which the logic of alienation is undermined but also to a need of criticism to invoke a new anthropology, a kind of knowledge that, without disregarding the specificity of the human against the animal, may acknowledge the sensible dimension without falling into an atomistic empiricism. Feuerbach’s claim to provide humanity and society with a naturalistic frame would offer a wide range of possible uses and appropriations, many of which would display a critical effort against him (first by Max Stirner, and later by Marx and Engels themselves). Before and concurrent to the impact of such positions on Marx, Moses Hess would creatively appropriate this matrix of estrangement, turning its focus into the sphere of social relations; in particular, an aspect which seems to govern our times: the logic of exchange.

HESS: THE PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION AND THE ESSENCE OF MONEY

Self-taught and detached from academic circles, Moses Hess started developing, by the end of 1830, an early concern about the transformations in Europe under the Restoration. Against the main role assigned by many of his Hegelian contemporaries to the German spirit as a future interpreter of human revolution, Hess defended a wider perspective (introduced in 1841 in *European Triarchy*), supported by the conviction that Europe had a culture and a past, which provided it with a unity that would not be necessary to impose. The historical conditions to overcome national boundaries were there. From a philosophical standpoint, Europe's union was sealed in Saint-Simon and Hegel: 'One of them [Saint-Simon] perceived the future, was full of the action and of the enthusiasm of a passionate heart; the other one [Hegel] perceived the past, inclined toward contemplation and possessed by a logical and cold spirit' (Hess 1961: 148). To this he adds, in a third place, the English contribution, the core of the most significant social transformations brought by industrial society. In a stylized history of national protagonisms, Hess places England as the latest and most evident display of a future already perceivable in its reach and sufferings: 'In the same manner in which the German Reformation—the origin of our new age—reached its full potential in France, now the fruit of the French Revolution (unless we make a wrong conclusion based on all hints) is about to ripen in England. The English nation is the most practical in the world. England is to our century what France was to the previous one' (Hess 1961: 117).

In the series of articles he would write in the years after the publication of his last book, Hess' socialism matures together with the theoretical exchanges in French thought, particularly in the line of Saint-Simonian traditions. *Socialismus und Communismus* takes depth on a line started in the previous book and which relates the comparison of French and German thoughts: '[T]he absolute unity in life appeared for the first time as abstract idealism in Germany and as abstract communism in France [...] German philosophy was, until Hegel, an esoteric science; nowadays, as a speculative atheism, it begins to have an influence in life. The same happens with French social philosophy, which, in a similar manner, begins to emancipate, after Saint-Simon and Fourier, from scholasticism, and begins to get involved with the people as scientific communism [wissenschaftlicher Kommunismus]' (Hess 1961: 200). Thus, where is the potency that Hess

perceives in both national traditions? Which institutions do they face, in parallel and with similar consequences?

The parallel advantages drawn by French and German traditions are expressed in these terms: Feuerbach is about overcoming Christianity; French social positions are about abolishing the state. Based on this perspective, Hess makes it evident that such an overcoming is consummated with communism. As a social instance in which the boundaries of both realities (religion and politics) get diluted, Hess attempts to go beyond communism only as the abolition of private property. The conception of communism suggested by Hess signals a new anthropological perspective where all forms of human domination would disappear and the antagonistic relation between labor and leisure would be restated to a point of dilution.

Philosophie der That constitutes an important point in Hess' production because it attempts a philosophy of action, with a clear Fitchian imprint, which could prevail against the abstraction of the French Revolution and against the merely subjective and internalized dimension of German philosophy. Even when these two perspectives constituted the most advanced expression of historical conditions, Hess' times allowed him to think about a superior instance: 'Now, the task of the philosophy of the spirit is to become a philosophy of action. Not only thought, but human activity as a whole as well, must reach a point where all oppositions disappear' (Hess 1961: 264). It is not a coincidence, in this specific aspect, that Hess would turn toward the manners in which private property operates. From an individual perspective, private property constitutes an externalized expression that gives testimony of human activity. On the other hand, this same activity which got embodied in an external object, separated from the individual, is established as a past action, independent of its protagonist. Property is an element of self-expression, as well as of alienation: '[...] man does not conceive an activity as an end by itself, but constantly conceives his gratification as something separate [...]' (Hess 1961: 265). In this problem, Hess points out the alienating inversion eventually produced by an action conceived as an appropriation: the potentiality of human creativity expressed as an external object becomes, in this externality, a factor for its own submission. In addition to this specificity, money is the most relevant example of wealth as an accumulated form of objects separated from production; this is, as an estranging activity where freedom turns into a dependency on a past activity.

The perspective deployed by Hess in *Über das Geldwesen* (*The Essence of Money*) recovers the synthetic trace, in a sense epigrammatic, of Feuerbach's formulations. Published in 1845 (and written one year and a half before, with circulation before its publishing), it vividly includes questions that a young Marx would retake very productively in the *Manuscripts* of 1844. Hess, in a few words, traces a suggestive path that allows material depth to categories that Feuerbach—in spite of his materialist pretenses—still kept enclosed into merely naturalistic formulations. In agreement with the centrality of the aforementioned praxis, Hess focuses on an attempt to characterize the social relations, which structure collective life in capitalist times, acknowledging that 'reciprocity in the exchange of an individual vital activity, commerce, the mutual stimulation of individual forces, that common realization is the true essence of individuals, their true power' (Hess 1961: 330). This materialist dimension notably augmented Feuerbach's perspectives and his notion of generic essence. Men do not belong to a genre only because of their specifically human condition (consciousness, reason and love) but are characterized in their collective life because they perform productive activities. Without these productive forces, they cannot develop as people: 'When more intense is the commerce among them [men], more intense is their productive force, and if commerce is restricted, their productive force is restricted as well. Without their vital medium, outside the exchange of their individual forces, individuals do not survive. Human commerce does not originate in its essence, it is its effective essence: it is both their theoretical, true vital essence and their vital, practical, and true activity' (Hess 1961: 331).

Its culminating point in the history of humanity, understood as the development of material forces—as the French used to say—is the industrial age. Nonetheless, this brought a deep transformation that ended up in commercial societies. Exchange inverts human relations, to the point that it defines the individual as the end and the genre as a means (Hess 1961: 333–334). In this general model of inversion, money condensates the material expression of alienation: 'Money is the product of men turned into strangers to one another; this is, an alienated man [...] Money is the value of human productive force for the true vital activity of human essence' (Hess 1961: 335). Inverting and overcoming the conditions of this alienated action causes Hess to think that communism can restate the conditions of social relations, allowing man to become not the owner of objects, but the creator of those circumstances that may allow him to perform his own activity.

In this context, Hess exposes certain parallels between Christianity and the world ruled by money, thus giving shape to a series of similarities which imply that even if the religious problem is solved, it is possible to find a continuation in earthly forms. In other words, Hess makes possible in his prose the transition from a philo-religious critical scenario into a material one, very close to Marx's concurrent developments about the limits of Hegel's conception of the state. In the correspondence between the real and spiritual worlds, between religious and profane forms of human existence, Hess invokes the notion of alienation: 'God is to theoretical life what *money* is to practical life, in this inverted world: the *alienated capacities* (*entäußerte Vermögen*) of men, their *auctioned vital activity*' (Hess 1961: 334). The constant analogy between these two dimensions points out that theory is lacking emancipation, and that it is necessary to project the conditions for liberation into a practical sphere, a substantial form which conforms the basis, in a sense, of all other forms of estrangement. Thus: 'We can always get emancipated, in theory, from the inverted consciousness of the world; yet, as long as we do not practically exit the inverted world, we must, as the proverb states, "howl with the wolves". Thus, we *must alienate* (*veräußern*) our essence, our life, our own free, vital activity constantly, in order to be able to maintain our *miserable existence*' (Hess 1961: 335).

The capitalist world consummates practically what Christianity set forth in spiritual terms. In part, the parallels stated by the author do not necessarily reject Feuerbach's positions. Hess acknowledges the need to observe its *current aspect* in a material sphere, particularly regarding the logic of exchange: 'Money is the product of *mutually estranged men* (*gegenseitig entfremdeten Menschen*), this is, of *alienated man* (*entäußerte Mensch*)' (Hess 1961: 335). It is not by chance that he expresses this continuity in religion, politics and economics. These three spheres are where human alienation is developed, both theoretically and practically. It is the material projection of that which Feuerbach encapsulates only within an intellectual sphere. This evidences that it is not enough with denouncing, in materialistic terms, the estranging forms of religion and philosophy, if they do not have a material match in which to serve as a practical equivalent. Human life is far from being summarized by the spontaneity of nature.

The connection goes much further than a relation based on reason and love. The terms of these relations, as long as they are established only as a necessary passage through the collective to reach an individual end (i.e. the market), will never be able to conform what Hess calls an *organic community* (*organische Gemeinschaft*).

It is quite suggestive that Hess criticizes all expressions (both material and spiritual) in which the inverted form of the communal is expressly invoked: ‘In other terms, politics and economics had the task of performing, at the level of a *practical* life, that which religion and theology had carried out at the level of a *theoretical* life: the practical alienation (*praktische Entäußerung*) of man had to be elevated to the dignity of a principle, as with his theoretical alienation’ (Hess 1961: 339). This practical alienation consummates the mercantile world, whose reality affects the human dimension of relations, inverting, under the blanket of individual freedom and independence, the set of relations that conform humanity as a collective. Money is the ultimate expression of this estrangement, with the appearance of isolated individuals whose respective acknowledgment only happens in the provisional sphere of a commercial relation. Hess postulates a parallel between money and the divinity, and allows us to conceive a form of alienation which is practically deployed in exchange, in addition to enabling an abstraction, as it does not appear as a consequence of the subject’s positioning regarding an act of knowledge, or in the sphere of consciousness, but requires a material connection as a support. Money consummates an abstraction, with exchange as its social context, and whose deployment makes invisible (abstract) the material character, not just bodily, as Feuerbach stated, but as a producing subject: ‘The object that for man is God in heaven, the *superhuman* good, in earth is the *inhuman* good, the material good, *tangible*, the *thing*, *property*; this is, the *product* appropriated from its producer, its creator; the abstract essence of commerce, *money*’ (Hess 1961: 339). Although Hess does not provide at this moment an alternative which would serve as an answer to this diagnosis (something he would later do), the foundation for the displacement of German philosophical discourse is set forth, integrated to political projections, with scenarios that would question the forms of statism, the market and the order of private property. Marx’s critique goes into this direction.

MARX AND THE PRACTICAL (PROFANE) FORMS
OF (ABSTRACTION) ESTRANGEMENT

The first and only volume of the *German-French Annals* (Paris, 1844) allowed Marx to develop an initial synthesis of the path from previous years, after the frustration of his career as a university professor (under the probable sponsorship of Bruno Bauer) shortly after he submitted his doctoral dissertation. Noticing, after his writings in the *Rheinische Zeitung* (1842), that the problem of German censorship emerged from more than the country's backwardness regarding political freedoms, and that it was also necessary to (re)think the theoretical question on itself (i.e. the Hegelian concept of the state), he devoted part of the summer of 1843 in Kreuznach to meditate about Hegel's positions published in 1821 (*Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*). Although these detailed manuscripts were published well into the twentieth century, the writing originally conceived as his *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* was part, eventually, of the *Annals*. They are quite significant in our journey. In his pages, Marx acknowledges the critique of religion as a mandatory starting point, and he points out that such a task has already concluded in Germany (although he does not expressly mention it) with Feuerbach's works about Christianity. This allows him to acknowledge that the deployment of estrangement, once its development is revealed in the religious/philosophical sphere, can also be recreated under its 'profane forms' (Marx & Engels 1981: 379/tr. 1982: 492).

If alienation can be perpetrated in earthly forms—as perceived early by Hess—Marx would set forth his first reflections about it taking into consideration the functioning of the state. Beyond any potential debate about conservatism or backwardness in a Hegelian perspective, let us keep the central aspect objected by Marx. The state, under a superior universal class, bureaucracy, is not able to place itself above the contradictions of civic society in the sphere of the market (Hegel calls it *system of needs*). The opposed interests of agricultural production and industry were thought as solved by an illustrated class that would control, from a universal/universalist perspective, the restrictions of a social standpoint, which may not be perceived by the logic that rules its own operation: a partial perspective infinitely replicated in the market's atomic multiplicity. Marx acknowledges, when he puts into perspective Hegel's statement, not only that the state is not able to recreate a true universality when it leaves untouched the foundation of civic society but also that the political emancipation which

France has been trying for almost half a century is useless. Here, Hess' perspective supplements Feuerbach's in an essential sense. The state as conceived by Hegel recreates an earthly form of political alienation in which individuals are subject to a power that they respect and fear, without realizing that its operation is intertwined with the roots of the civic society that they compose and support.

Without Marx expressly defining yet the class character of the state, his observations are recognized in Hess, in the depth in which he read the European map. In a few words, Germany must not aspire to realize itself in the political universe with which the Revolution had provided France (singularity in the diagnostics of his—now former—comrade, Bauer) with political and civic freedoms. Germany can think an even more substantial horizon, with a revolutionary program beyond the boundaries of a *partial revolution* (i.e. political) to establish a *radical* program implying human emancipation.

If it is about a *practical* revolution/liberation, which would avoid the typically German speculative exit to the poignant problems of the times, a part of society, a class within society, should provide thrust to the whole process. For the first time, in this brief text, Marx attributes to the *proletariat* the conditions of possibility of a *positive* overcoming of the status quo (as opposed to a *negative* one, understood as a merely speculative overcoming). Its peculiarity resides, in that it is the only one focused on its condition, the strictly human dimension expressed by labor. In other words, Marx starts to reflect upon the possibility of finding a different perspective in order to rescue a universal dimension that would effectively replace a state that only reproduces some profane forms of alienation.

It is not by chance that the stay in Paris had a significant theoretical influence on those perspectives. The sensitivity about the so-called *social question* is nurtured by the impact of the exchange with referents of French socialism. Cabet, Proudhon, Leroux, the Saint-Simonians, the romantics and the philo-Catholics provided the thinker from Trier with a suggestive breeding ground to reflect that society is supported, as a whole, by a major actor which, in spite of holding it materially, is marginalized not only by republican power but from any minimum spillage of wealth. The novelty, in comparison with his French comrades, is the peculiar manner in which he perceives the relation between philosophy and revolution. A philosophy without the proletariat is mere speculation without a body; the proletariat without a philosophy is just action without a direction.

The incipient reflection about the working class—possibly a new reservoir of universality in order to think of an effective overcoming against the limits of the state—makes it evident that civic society is addressed with a priority on an essential practical dimension—according to Marx, labor. From this perspective, in the same issue of the *Annals*, he frankly argues with Bauer in an article which constitutes a reply, *On the Jewish Question*. Refuting the positions of his comrade and former mentor, Marx considers that the emancipating horizon which he proposes is restricted. It is not about liberating the state of religious forms, or about aspiring to an emancipation from religion in a backward Germany. The conditions are given, actually, to perform a human, integral emancipation like the one that aspires to liberate itself from the state.

The parallels between both texts are significant, and this second one, somehow longer than the other, provides a rich approach not only toward the specific key in which Marx appropriates Feuerbach's matrix but also in the manner in which Hess⁶ resonates, as can be observed here: 'Only when the true individual recovers within himself the abstract citizen and becomes, as an individual man, a *generic essence* [*Gattungswesen*], in his individual labor and in his individual relations; only when man has been able to recognize and to organize his "*forces propres*" as *social forces* and when he, therefore, does not remove from himself the social force in the form of a *political force*, we can say that human emancipation is achieved' (Marx & Engels 1981: 370/tr. 1982: 484). In the same manner, it is tangible that the same analogies between money and divinity stated by Hess are included in Marx's prose by the end of the text: 'Money is the essence of labor and of the existence of man, estranged from him, strange essence that dominates him and is adored by him' (Marx & Engels 1981: 375/tr. 1982: 487).⁷

Shortly afterwards, the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844 focused on economic and political discourses. A paradigmatic expression about commercial society, it is for Marx a somehow complex categorical web, essentially summarized in the category of labor. Labor in capitalist societies hides, behind private property, estrangement. The economy of Great Britain has made a discovery, which is presented as contradictory. Its referents (paradigmatically, Adam Smith) state that human labor, human industry, is the sole generator of wealth, even though this same industry hires and terminates human laborers. This is for Marx the great contradiction in the discourse of political economy: there is nothing sacred in property, as property is merely accumulated labor. Now, if labor is the source of property, it suffers the consequences of the power that property imposes

through money. In Marx's words: 'The product of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the objectification of labor. Labor's realization is its objectification. This realization of labor, as presented in political economy, appears as a loss of realization for the worker; objectification as loss and subjection of the object; appropriation as estrangement, as alienation' (Marx & Engels 1968: 511–512/tr. 1982: 596). The *fact* on which Marx's reflection begins is the impoverishment of workers, which increases to the same extent to which the production of wealth increases. An analysis shows that this fact expresses an essence. The progressive impoverishment of workers is the process whose general and human form is *alienation*. In this manner, the economic fact manifests a certain elaboration, which allows it to reveal its hidden meaning. Under the statement of economic facts, there is an anthropological critique, which expresses the process of alienation.

According to Feuerbach, man produces God: he objectivizes in God the predicates that constitute his essence. Now, when it is stated that a worker produces an object, the starting point is the concept of production. Marx's critique thinks about the relation between the worker and his product, in the same manner in which the relation between God and man was given in a religious context. Nonetheless, unlike Feuerbach, Marx demonstrates that productive activity is identified with generic activity (activity by man in that with it he is making an affirmation of his own essence) and the object produced with the objectivization of man's generic essence. The fact that this product increases the possibility of more wealth for the capitalist appears as a manifest consequence of alienation, in which man becomes an object of its object. The first manuscripts conclude categorically in two spheres. The alienation of workers through labor is what remains hidden in private property. When this estrangement happens as a practical process, it can only be overcome practically as well. It is not enough with denouncing the phenomenon. It is not enough with a comprehension and a subsequent critique. It can only be modified as a result of a practice which, as we have seen, includes within itself a revolutionary program.

In the *Manuscripts*, Marx develops a brief history of the circumstances which ended up in estranged labor and have as their context civil society and, particularly, the organization of *industry*. The basis for a possible overcoming of the status quo are formulated there, including a materialist aspect of communism, making historical to a certain extent what Feuerbach's *Gattungswesen* stated somehow abstractly. It is clear that

Marx avoids specificities about the future, but he still acknowledges: ‘But to overcome *real* private property, it is necessary the *real action* of communism. It will be carried out by history, and this movement that we *ideally* represent as our own overcoming will be a very long and very hard process’ (Marx & Engels 1968: 553/tr. 1982: 632). The emphasis in this real dimension recovers overtones from Hess and increases the distance with Feuerbach. It is not by chance that in the pages of this third manuscript, Marx specifically addresses money.

Without disregarding the references to Shakespeare (*Timon of Athens*) and Goethe (*Faust*) in the lament of their characters for the evils and powers of money, Marx reflects about them in a manner related to Hess’, linking the problem of estranged labor to its essential note: ‘The inversion and confusion of all natural and human qualities, the conjunction of two impossible aspects, the *divine* strength of money resides in its own *essence*, as it is the alienating, estranging, and estranged *generic essence* of men’ (Marx & Engels 1968: 565/tr. 1982: 643). As a ‘power of inversion’, money has the virtue of conjugating the general confusion in a social world, with an inversion that makes it become an end, which subjugates its holders, instead of being under their control.

Nonetheless, the aspect in which Marx deepens and extends Hess’ formulations with greater power is exposed in the allusions of mutation that money introduces in the sphere of representation and the sphere of reality. Money ‘allows to convert *representation into reality and reality into a mere representation*, it converts the *essential real forces of man and nature* in purely abstract representations [...]’ (Marx & Engels 1968: 566/tr. 1982: 644). The term chosen by Marx as a counterpart to ‘reality’ is ‘representation’. In German, the term *Vorstellung* has a long and weighing history in idealism (Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel himself), whose allusion supposes an acknowledgment of a cognitive aspect, which is, in general, opposed to *presentation/exposition* [*Darstellung*] or event of reality itself, and that in consequence appears, in general, as a kind of partial, provisional or incomplete knowledge. Money is able to achieve in these dynamics not only an inversion but also a certain flow between the sphere of thought and the sphere of the real, overlapping the forms in which alienation is expressed. Briefly stated, when divinity was the alienating release that sublimated real poverty, whose perpetuity was politically assured by the state, money provides the necessary abstraction that expresses a counterpart to estranged labor and private property. Even in the practical dimension of exchange, money is able to reproduce an abstraction removed from its holders and is

imposed into them with the same force as the divinity falls over the believers. Marx's critical journey will bring him, shortly afterwards, to think that this specific phenomenon connecting both specificities may begin to be reflected upon if ideology is taken into consideration. By then, the journey of exploration and critique of political economy will project him to a much broader and complex approach than these initial formulations.

CODA

In Karl Marx's bicentennial, even this early aspect of his oeuvre, as analyzed here, proves to be very current. By exploring the contributions of a young Hegelianism that affected his first reflections about how commercial society works and how capitalist production is organized, we were able to reconstruct a connection not always properly appreciated in the recurring exegesis of different parts of his vast reflections. Within the scope of a denunciation emerging in the specific situation of the German political context, Marx's perspective though about a phenomenon, which, beyond national boundaries, cultural expressions and religious specificities, was able to warn about the emancipatory outlook in the social and economic transformations of the nineteenth century.

The development of a critique of alienation, reconstructed in this text, to eventually reach his perspectives about the logic of money, warn the modern reader about the contemporary processes of abstraction that monetary dynamics weave increasingly faster, deploying a potential for the visualization of social relations, and whose implications seem difficult to analyze and, even more so, to anticipate. Money is a general equivalent, a driving force by definition, the ethereal expression of an age in which images seem to wrap around the flows (of information, capital, populations, etc.), that condense with a particular plasticity the manner in which social relations are set forth beyond the control of their protagonists. Marx's early diagnosis warns about the secular forms that recreate the religious, where there are equivalents to deity which, surreptitiously, give shape to social relations in order to deploy in its spectral objectivity—as he would state in *Capital*—a materiality that, not for being intangible, is less present or less determinant. Money and its theological connotations, aspects to which Marx would return, in his maturity, with a tangential recurrence, set forth in these early texts a suggestive intersection between discursive traditions that his own thought was able to encompass in a transcendent manner. At the crossroads of German idealism, French socialism

and British political economy—combination through which Lenin would define Marxism—money was to Marx a preferred object to access the social fabric, which is the backbone of capitalist society. It being called *geld*, *go(l)d* or *argent*, a secular divinity, a universal logical and practical means, or a practical abstraction, its functioning strongly precludes the question formulated by Marx in 1844: ‘*ist das Geld nicht das Band aller Bande?*’

This article was translated by Anahí Prucca.

NOTES

1. ‘The idea is produced and testified not by means of a *really different* other—which may not be other than an empiric-concrete intellectual intuition;—it is produced based on a *formal* and apparent opposite [...] Beyond this, the other of pure thought is, in general, sensible understanding. An attempt in the domain of philosophy is, therefore, to overcome the contradiction between sensible understanding and pure thought [...]’ (Feuerbach 1959: 183/tr. 1974: 41–42) [Emphasis in the original. Unless specifically stated, the translations are our own.]
2. It is in a community that the conditions of the specifically human are realized: ‘Only life in a community is true divine life that satisfies itself; this simple thought, this truth, natural and innate to man, is the secret of the supernatural mystery of the trinity. But religion also expresses this truth, as any other, in an indirect and inverted manner, as it also turns a general truth into a particular one, and the true subject into a predicate [...]’ (Feuerbach 1960: 38/tr. 1995: 118).
3. Thus, it can be stated that: ‘*In the same manner* in which theology *divides and alienates* man, in order to subsequently identify with him the alienated essence, also Hegel *multiplies and disperses* the simple essence of nature and man, *self-identical*, to mediate later through violence that which was separated by means of violence’ (Feuerbach 1959: 226/tr. 1976: 24).
4. ‘Just as the abstraction of everything sensible and material had been a necessary condition for theology, it was the same for speculative philosophy, with the only difference that abstraction is, in turn, a *sensible* abstraction, as its object, even when reached through abstraction, is again represented as a sensible being, while abstraction in speculative philosophy is a spiritual abstraction: when thought, it only has a scientific or theoretical significance, but not a practical one’ (Feuerbach 1959: 254/tr. 1976: 58).
5. ‘To abstract means to place the *essence of nature outside nature*, the essence of thought *outside the act of thinking*. Hegelian philosophy has estranged

man, as its whole system rests in these acts of abstraction' (Feuerbach 1959: 227/tr. 1976: 25).

6. Although Hess published *The Essence of Money* in 1845, Marx had a previous version, which he intended to include in the *Annals*. The same year in which the only number of the *Annals* was published, Hess included in the *Vorwärts* (December of 1844) the *Red Catechism*, where there were some preliminary reflections about money. In the third section (questions and answers from 14 to 19), his statements were still very much in consonance with the Weitling's positions in *Garantien der Harmonie und Freiheit* (1842).
7. Marx uses the practical connotation of the term 'alienation' (as a sale) [*Veräußerung*] to deploy with an eloquent play on words the peculiar transmutation performed by money: 'The sale is the practice of estrangement [*Die Veräußerung ist die Praxis der Entäußerung*]. Just as man, when he remains subject to religious constraints, is only able to objectivize his essence, turning it into a fantastic being *alien* to him, and can only practically behave under the rule of selfish need; only in this manner can he practically produce objects to be sold, placing his products and activity under an alien power and giving them the significance of an alien essence, which is money' (Marx & Engels 1981: 376–377/tr. 1982: 489).

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Real Abstraction: Philological Issues

Roberto Fineschi

There is a relatively long list of ‘Marxian’ categories that Marx has never used: labor theory of value, historical materialism, philosophy of praxis and so on. ‘*Realabstraktion*’ is no exception. The question is then whether this category might be useful for a better understanding (or transformation) of society, or shed more light on Marx’s theory. Further difficulties arise from the delicate status of complex philosophical concepts such as ‘real’ or ‘abstraction’, which themselves are not easy to define and extremely controversial. In order to avoid a generic use of those categories, I shall try to reconstruct and contextualize the specific meaning these words have in Marx’s mature theory of Capital, and how they change in progress. The theory of commodity circulation and the definition of abstract labor will be the main focus of this research, and eventually the theory of fetishism and reification. In light of this philological reconstruction, it will be possible to answer the question about the limits within which we can use this category.

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‘ABSTRACT’ AND ‘REAL’ FROM THE *GRUNDRISSE*
TO *A CONTRIBUTION*. CONTROVERSIES WITH A DEFINITION

In his fundamental essay, Sohn-Rethel (1978: 21 and ff.) first introduced the famous opposition between thought and real abstractions: here, ‘real’ seems to be the opposite of ‘thought’, in the sense of an abstraction that is not posited by thought, but result of a practical process. Thought abstraction is therefore nothing but a translation in thoughts of something that actually happens in those societies that are based on commodity exchange, where abstractions are practically posited by a social dynamic. If this is the key point, passages in Marx’s works that can lead to this interpretation are mostly to be found in *A Contribution*. Here he says:

To measure the exchange values of commodities by the labour time they contain, the different kinds of labour have to be reduced to uniform, homogeneous, simple labour, in short to labour of uniform quality, whose only difference, therefore, is quantity. This reduction appears to be an abstraction, but it is an abstraction which is made every day in the social process of production. The conversion of all commodities into labour time is no greater an abstraction, and is no less real, than the resolution of all organic bodies into air. (Marx 1988: 272; German: Marx 1980: 110)

If we further follow this argument in *A Contribution*, we see that Marx clearly refers to the development of a general equivalent: exchange-value¹ is only unilateral and mental, mere abstraction, until it gets posited as practical social result by the exchange process. It becomes from ‘theoretical’, ‘mere abstraction’, to a social result; the general equivalent is the instantiation of a particular commodity as universal equivalent. Before a general equivalent is posited, value exists only as mere abstraction for the commodity owners in their minds. Instead, it needs to be there, to be instantiated for and by commodities themselves in their exchange process:

Every commodity however is the commodity which, as a result of the alienation of its particular use value, must appear as the direct materialisation of universal labour time. But on the other hand, only particular commodities, particular use values embodying the labour of private individuals, confront one another in the exchange process. Universal labour time itself is an abstraction which, as such, does not exist for commodities. (Marx 1988: 286; German: Marx 1980: 123)

The wording is precise and can be found again at the end of the process, once the general equivalent is posited, with the opposition ‘thought’ versus ‘social result’: ‘This is a theoretical statement as long as the commodity is merely thought as a definite quantity of objectified universal labour time. The existence [*Dasein*] of a particular commodity as a universal equivalent is transformed from a pure abstraction into a social result of the exchange process, if one simply reverses the above series of equations’ (Marx 1988: 287; German: Marx 1980: 124).

The exchange process was supposed to be the ‘real’ side of the argument, in opposition to the just thought abstraction made by the actors before they actually exchange. The exposition in *A Contribution* follows and develops the same path Marx formulated for the first time in the *Grundrisse*.²

This strong contrast of ‘thought’/‘abstract’ versus ‘instantiated’/‘actual’ value is, however, not so relevant in the later, more mature formulation of *Capital*, vol. 1. What was supposed to be the ‘thought’ part of the analysis becomes now the value-form section. It would be too long to deal extensively with that, but it has been philologically shown how in *Capital*, and in particular in the second German edition, Marx considered the entire development of the money deduction, within the value-form, as a theoretical whole, where the exchange-individuals are already present in the argument since the very beginning (Lietz 1987, 1989). In fact, also in *A Contribution*, the ‘real’ interaction was nothing but what would later become the passage to a general equivalent. In *A Contribution*, however, this passage was not possible in the thought analysis, but only in the ‘real’ dynamic of the exchange process. In *Capital*, the value-form is already a whole theory of money deduction that implies exchanging individuals; for this reason, a general equivalent can be deduced within the value-form.

A consequence of this change is that also the concept of ‘real’ is to be conceived in a theoretical sense; the ‘real’ instantiation of the ‘thought’ value abstraction happens in thought as well, within a theory. Marx is not talking about ‘historical’ developments as in a history book. Also the ‘historical excursus’ that we can find in the chapter on the Exchange process is a sort of phenomenology of the generalization of the value-form to a money-form, but neither a chapter of history nor a theory of a pre-capitalist society.³

Epistemologically, the distinction is not between a non-better defined reality and thought. Here, Marx makes a theory of individuals that think and act: this is not about them acting in history outside of the theory, but

a theory of their historical action. This doesn't certainly mean that outside thought no 'reality' exists, but that Marx's is a theory of that reality, and what reality means is defined within this theoretical system. Exchange process, commodity, money of course exists before the theory that explains them, and such a theory is possible only because they have already developed to a certain extent. However, the theory that explains them does not simply correspond to, or mechanically reflect, their historical genesis or form of appearance.

I believe that this is why Marx re-worded these sections and did not use anymore the concept of thought in opposition to actual or instantiated (not 'real', strictly speaking). It seems to me that a controversial point in a few interpretations is the non-very clear status of the category 'real'⁴: sometimes it seems that they mean the non-theorized world outside the mind; in some other cases, they mean the dynamic of the social process that produces those abstractions, which is however already framed within a theory. In some others, it seems that the two levels uncritically go into each other, so that it remains unclear what the 'reality' of the process is.⁵

The meaning that the concept 'abstract' in *Capital* is therefore different: it doesn't follow anymore the same development as in the *Grundrisse* and *A Contribution*; in *Capital*, it is not the other side of 'real', but 'concrete'. Moreover, the adjective is used to define 'labor' and 'wealth', which is a very limited and precise utilization.

ABSTRACT LABOR IN *CAPITAL*. ABSTRACTION, PARCELIZATION, ALIENATION: CONTROVERSIAL SYNTHESSES

A key point is the definition of 'abstract labor'. As it is known, Marx introduced this category in the analysis of commodity and money as one of the two sides of the commodity producing labor. The same labor can be addressed as abstract or concrete if considered productive, respectively, of value or use value. Thought and abstraction are not used anymore in the sense we could find in *A Contribution*. The theoretical context is now different and 'abstract' is the opposite of 'concrete'. This abstract labor is always a concrete labor, but considered in its pure formalism. It does not exist as abstract as such, but is always both concrete and abstract.⁶

Some have tried to make a connection between this concept and the labor that results from the parcelization of the individual activity within the production process—by some also labeled as 'alienated'—that we have through

the ‘real’ subsumption of the labor process under capital. These concepts are connected, but in a specific sense. In general terms, labor is abstract inasmuch as it produces value, not because of its parcelization. It subsists even if every single producer is in charge of the entire production of their good, even if there is no internal division of labor within the production process. The second kind of abstraction is instead explicitly connected with the partial character of the activity that aims at the production of an object, not the division of labor in society in its complex. In this case, production of abstract labor refers to the further division inside the process, and the growing partiality of the individual activity in the production of the product itself, until it becomes so formalistic that can be replaced by a machine. It is loss of complexity, concreteness that characterizes this second abstraction.

If, on the one hand, the growing partiality of the individual activity is the most adequate form of labor in the capitalist mode of production, on the other this is not why labor is abstract. Internal division of labor has always existed and will exist after capitalism, but not abstract labor, which is value producing labor; and, in fact, Marx never used ‘abstract labor’ for the parcelized labor. The fact that he does not is significant, because several circumstances could have brought him to do it, first of all the probable source of the phrase ‘abstract labor’. Both in the Jena’s system drafts⁷ and *Philosophy of right*⁸, Hegel, the philosopher that probably invented the expression ‘abstract labor’, talks about this kind of abstraction: labor is abstract because of its parcelization; the more parcelized, the more abstract. Making this point, Hegel put together a theory of value and property, and the division of labor within production and mechanization. This means that Hegel, misled by the classics and Smith in particular, mixed together the division of labor in commodity circulation and manufacture production.⁹ As regards the individual actors determined in this theoretical framework, in Hegel we have the same short circuit we can find later in those interpreters of Marx that put on the same plan the phenomenal level (abstract labor as defined in the commodity circulation, what Marx actually called abstract labor, where subjects appears as ‘persons’, the fundament of bourgeois ideology), and the production process (abstract labor as parcelization, what Marx actually did not define abstract labor, where subjects are, instead, ‘classes’). This consistently affects also the foundations of a Marxian political theory.

If we move back to Marx, he did not use the ‘parcelization’ concept to talk about abstract labor in *Capital*, and he actually only randomly did before. He did it just occasionally in few passages in the notes of ‘44.’¹⁰ In those notes, he still had an anthropological perspective, a *Gattungswesen* model, according to which the capitalist mode of production alienated the

fullness of the human essence expressed in and through labor. In my opinion, some interpreters misunderstood Marx's argument following this line: labor as essence, abstract/parcelized labor as alienated form of the activity because of capitalism, abstraction as reality of this alienated world, fight against abstractions = capitalism as historical, philosophical, anthropological revolutionary perspective. The mature theory of *Capital* would analytically show this logic of alienation/abstraction intuited in the notes of '44. In my opinion, this misinterpretation can be explained as follows: the concept of 'person', posited by commodity circulation as human essence, is taken not as the phenomenal and non-substantial form of subjectivity, but as human essence itself. Since its apparent fullness (freedom and equality)—another phenomenal appearance of commodity circulation—is negated by the productive praxis of the capitalist mode of production, the reappropriation of the fullness of personality (full humanity, where personality = humanity) seems to be the goal of emancipation/revolution. This perspective seems, however, to be set within the bourgeois theoretical framework: commodity circulation and, in particular, its phenomenal instantiation (person) is misconceived as subject in the form of human essence. I believe that most of the anthropological interpretations of Marx's theory rely on this misunderstanding. Merging abstract labor in the two different levels of abstraction (commodity circulation and production process) is the key point here, as the misconception of the historical subjects (individuals vs. classes). I don't think this nexus is philologically tenable, since that 'extended' concept of abstract labor is not supported by textual evidence.

In *Capital*, Marx moved beyond any essentialistic model and based the same concept of human nature on the dialectic of the historical process, where the same concepts of 'man' or 'abstract labor' become, emerge, get defined and transformed in and through the process itself. In regard to this, it is worth noticing another important change in *Capital*: there labor is just *one* element of the *labor process*¹: labor process, and not *labor*, is now the most abstract, 'essential' level. Labor process does not exist as such, but its elements will be in every mode of production; it consists of humans (they themselves part of nature) and things (means and object of labor); it is an interaction with a specifically determined natural subject/subjects on natural object within nature. This interaction never happened, happens or will happen in a *vacuum*: the way these elements combine is historically determined, and determines the different modes of production; and this specific determination allows to correctly collocate subjects and objects in their proper functional positions within the system of

production and reproduction. No given essence, but a process where everything is functionally defined through the process dynamic. Here classes are the historical subjects, and we have a theory of historical process: this is Marx's mature solution.¹²

To avoid misunderstandings, it is useful to precise that the labor process is no new abstract fixed essence. In fact, since the capitalist mode of production determines the inversion of subject and object in the labor process with the subsumption of it under capital, if the labor process represented such an essence, the way out of the capitalist alienation would be re-establishing the 'original' order. But this is not what Marx theorizes. The actual inversion of subject and object in the production process is exactly what we need to keep as core point to move to a new, higher level of subjectivity: The *Gesamtarbeiter*. Marx does not claim a return to the full personal individuality based on singles; instead he introduced the concept of *Gesamtarbeiter* at the end of the analysis of the absolute and relative surplus-value, as integrated social producer, where the parcelization and inversion are not just kept, but the basis of the fullness of a bigger subjectivity.¹³ This is the actual historical production of a new universal human concept as a fact, as a compound subject, not just as a thought abstraction as it had been as cultural theme starting with the Renaissance. Universals are also result of a historical process.

The 'alienated' character of labor here (although, in *Capital*, Marx did not use this expression, as did not connect abstract labor to the alienation concept) is not its parcelization but the lack of social control on the socialized labor. This socialization happens *thanks* to the capitalist mode of production. This is the dialectic of form and content, the only one that allows to scientifically think a process that, at the same time, is positive and negative.¹⁴

ABSTRACT, CONCRETE AND METHOD: FURTHER CONTROVERSIES AND COLLETTI'S APORIAS

In my opinion, Colletti's interpretation is a good synthesis of all these misunderstandings, also because he made another passage; he connected such an essentialist approach with an epistemological point related to Marx's method: the famous descend from concrete to abstract and from abstract to concrete.

In his opinion, a passage from the first German edition of Marx's *Capital*, vol. 1,¹⁵ modified and 'reduced' in the second one, shows how Marx claimed that the inversion of the value-form is nothing but the

philosophical reflex of the real inversion that takes place in the commodity society; Hegel's philosophy and the dialectical method, as top theoretical expression of this inversion, is therefore the perfect way to give theoretical form to this world: the inverted philosophy that comes out and gives proper explanation of an actual inverted reality. At the same time, this method and philosophy seems implicitly to be valid as long as this inverted reality exists. In Colletti's own words:

Die Wertform was added by Marx to the first edition of *Capital* while the work was already in press. It is a fact that the page which we have taken from it reproduces to the letter the arguments with which Marx first criticized Hegel's dialectic in his early writing, the *Kritik des Hegelschen Staatsrechts*. The abstract-universal, which ought to be the predicate—i.e. a 'property of the concrete or the sensate'—becomes the subject, a self-subsisting entity; 'contrariwise the concrete-sensate counts merely as the phenomenal form of the abstract-universal'—i.e. as the predicate of its own substantified predicate. This overturning, this quid pro quo, this *Umkehrung*, which, according to Marx, rules Hegel's *Logic*, rules also, long before the *Logic*, the *objective* mechanisms of this society—beginning right from the relation of 'equivalence' and the exchange of commodities. (Colletti 1973: 282)

Here Colletti seems to mix two different themes in an uncritical way: the inversion in the value-form and the inversion of subject and object in the labor process subsumed under capital.

What, in my opinion, Marx does in the mentioned passage is to talk about the inversion of concrete and abstract in the value-form development; this inversion takes place in the scientific reconstruction of reality, not in reality itself, because there is no possible inversion in reality of concrete and abstract under this regard, otherwise the thesis would be that abstract creates concrete, thought creates sensibility, that is the fundamental thesis of subjective idealism, something against which Marx consistently insists all over his life. The passage mentioned by Colletti in particular is written to avoid such misinterpretation. The materialistic primacy of objectivity over thought is, in Marx's own opinion, what distinguishes his philosophy from the bad Hegelian idealism. Here no real inversion is possible; otherwise, subjective idealism would be correct and there's no doubt that Marx thinks it is not.

This is not the same argument that Marx makes when he mentions the 'inverted' comprehension of the world by bourgeois economists and philosophers; he claims that they are *wrong* in the understanding of reality,

because they take the *inverted phenomenal manifestation* of essence as essence itself: persons as actual historical subjects, money as thing with social power and so on. In this case, Marx is not talking about science, but bad representations, ideology.

The scientific exposition moves from abstract to concrete to reproduce reality in thoughts, it is not the production of reality and it is not a mere transposition of reality in thoughts: essence and phenomenon do not match immediately. The movement from abstract to concrete is how thought explains reality. There is no possible ‘real’ inversion under this regard: scientific understanding shows how money comes out from commodity and is a social product; inverted (mis)understanding conceives the social power of money as its material quality. In spite of the ‘inversion’ of concrete and abstract in the explanation, and the fact that phenomenally money continues to manifest itself and work as a thing, money is not a thing. Marx does not think that an inverted theory, as a sort of photographic mirror of inverted reality, is science. On the contrary, a scientific reconstruction that starts from abstract shows why the world appears upside-down, but is not. Here Colletti misunderstands and puts together science and ideology as regards the meaning of ‘inversion’ and the dialectic of ‘abstract’ and ‘concrete’.

Colletti thinks he can do this, inasmuch as, in his interpretation, this methodological point is paralleled by the inversion of subject and object in the production process; this takes place because of the real subsumption of the labor process under capital. The actual inversion in the production process pushed Colletti to make the *salto mortale* and think that the two inversions (in the circulation and in the production process) are two sides of the same coins.

I have tried to show how, on the one hand, we don’t have any real inversion on the side of the scientific explanation; on the other, even if we have an actual inversion of subject and object in the labor process, it is not philologically correct to claim that Marx conceives the capitalist production process as an inversion of something naturally given or essential; on the contrary, Marx wants to keep this alleged inversion as basis of a new form of subjectivity that is historically produced by the capitalist mode of production itself: the *Gesamtarbeiter*. According to Marx, a future society will be based on the historical progress allowed by this inversion. Therefore, also under this regard, Colletti’s thesis doesn’t get Marx’s point and reduces his theory of historical process to a mere conflict of essence and (inverted) appearance.¹⁶

The inversion of abstract and concrete in the scientific method does not match a ‘real’ inversion. This is what ideology does. The inversion of subject and object in the production process is to be conceived in regard to previous modes of production, not essence.¹⁷

REAL ABSTRACTION, OR HISTORICAL FORMS OF SINGULARITY

The final part of this essay regards the concept of ‘real abstraction’ as a whole, after I have tried to show controversial interpretations that can separately derive from a misunderstanding of the concepts of ‘real’ and ‘abstract’. In general terms, one of the most important focuses is that, in capitalism, abstractions become real and work in the system as acting subjects. It is not always very clear what these abstractions should be, since Marx does not explicitly use the phrase ‘real abstraction’. Probably, most of the interpreters would accept in the list money as ‘naked’ universal form of wealth, and capital as this abstraction transformed into a subject.¹⁸

In general terms, one could wonder whether real abstractions exist only in the capitalist mode of production, inasmuch as, as Hegel already showed, abstractions always need to exist in particular ‘bodies’. They don’t exist as such in their universality, but are particular universals: ‘singulars’ (Hegel 2010: 546 and ff.). An alleged separate ‘universal’ turns to be just a particular. An actual universality can be only the one that is able to show how universals act through particulars until a particular, in its particularity, plays the role of a universal. Therefore, existing universals are always ‘real’, in the sense that they are instantiated. In more specific terms, we have already seen how abstract is a quality of concrete, and their separation is an ‘intellectual’ result, as Hegel would say. In a dialectical theory, the fact that abstractions are real, universals are particulars and so on is no surprise.

If we come back to Marx’s theory, money is a particular commodity that works as universal commodity. The labor that produces the money-commodity works in its particularity as universal representative of labor (Marx 1996: 69, 77; German: Marx 1991: 59, 68). And also the abstract activity of the workers is a concrete activity. Abstract labor is possible only as pure formal treatment of concrete labor, because concrete labor and abstract labor are just two sides of the same activity. Then, the abstraction of labor in general or value objectivity as such are real abstractions in the sense that a specific labor and a specific commodity work as universal labor

and universal commodity. They are not purely abstract, but particular ones that work as universal, they are singular.

Does this structure belong just the capitalist mode of production or not? In general terms, since the instantiation of universality as such is part of the concept of Singularity itself, this seems to be an ontologically trans-historical notion. Singularities don't belong just to the capitalist mode of production: an emperor, the three medieval classes, State and so on are not less existing universalities, 'real abstractions', than money or capital. A king, for instance, is a really existing universal that thinks that he is the king because of himself and not because there are people that relate as subjects to him. Besides, these are social actors, subjects as capital or money are. If this is also a crucial aspect in the meaning of 'real abstraction', it doesn't seem then that existing universals acting as subjects are only in the capitalist mode of production. We can talk maybe of historically specific real abstractions, if we want to keep this concept.

The fact that the capitalist mode of production produces fetish characters, such as Money or Capital itself, means that abstractions are produced in a very specific and limited way. Actually, Marx shows that Money or Capital are abstracts only inasmuch as they seem to own their social qualities as physical properties, while this happens only because there is a social relationship and process that posits that. They are as they appear only inasmuch as they are a ring in a big chain, which includes the material process of production. But the same happens in regard to 'person' or 'man': they are those universalities only abstracting from the real process. But capitalism is a process, and produces and re-produces those universalities *as things*: this is its specific historical determination. To reconstruct this process and understand how it actually works does not cancel that appearance as long as the material structures that produce it are solid. Cutting the veil, showing the essence, does not stop the objective process.

Given that, it seems that real abstractions are not just in the capitalist mode of production; a domination of abstractions assumes different, specific forms in different times. What is specific of the capitalist mode of production is that these abstractions are not simply 'real' but appear as things. If we make the mistake to reduce the concept of reality to being a thing, we fall in a very simple and unsophisticated form of realism and cancel the subtitle Marxian distinction between content and form.

CONCLUSIONS

Since the concept of ‘real abstraction’ is not explicitly present in Marx’s works, I have tried to show how its use is connected with complex issues. The first is the definition itself of ‘real’ and ‘abstraction’: these concepts can be easily misunderstood outside a precise philological reconstruction of Marx’s thought. This kind of miscomprehension has brought to controversial parallels with essentialist theories that are very far, in my opinion, from Marx’s theory of the historical process. The restriction of real abstraction just to capitalism is another controversial point that can be questioned by a more general analysis of the concept of Singularity as both historical and transhistorical categories.

These difficulties impose, in my opinion, a cautious use of this category that is very suggestive and evocative on the one hand and potentially misleading on the other.

NOTES

1. Actually ‘value’. In this moment (1859), Marx still did not have a clear distinction between value and exchange-value. Philological results have shown that he will precisely and consistently define these categories only in the second German edition of book 1 (1872/3). See Hecker (1987).
2. In that text as well, he distinguished between a thought and real deduction of general equivalent/money (at the time they were defined in the same way): ‘This third thing, distinct from the other two since it expresses a ratio, exists initially in the head, in the imagination, just as in general ratios can only be *thought* if they are to be fixed, as distinct from the subjects which are in that ratio to each other’ (Marx 1986: 81; German: Marx 1976: 77–78). Then, he adds: ‘For mere comparison, for the valuation of products, for the notional determination of their value, it is enough to make this transformation in the head (a transformation in which the product exists simply as the expression of quantitative relationships of production). For the comparison of commodities, this abstraction is sufficient; for actual exchange, this abstraction must again be objectified, symbolized, realized through a token’ (Marx 1986: 91; German: Marx 1976: 78). Finally, ‘Through the product becoming a commodity and the commodity becoming exchange value, it acquires, first in our mind, a dual existence. This mental duplication proceeds (and must proceed) to the point where the commodity appears dual in actual exchange: as natural product on the one hand, as exchange value on the other. I.e. its exchange value acquires an existence materially separated from it’ (Marx 1986: 81; German: Marx 1976: 79).

3. For a precise philological reconstruction of all this development through the different versions of the theory since the *Grundrisse* to the second German edition of *Capital*, vol. 1, see Fineschi (2006), On the changes and development in the different edition of Book 1, see Hecker (1987), Jungnickel (1988, 1989). About this, see all the quarrel on the so-called simple commodity production (see Hecker 1997; Rakowitz 2000).
4. Another relevant issue is that the German language has two different words for ‘real’, which are ‘reel’ (with the variant ‘real’), and ‘wirklich’. To give an example, not every ‘real’ is ‘wirklich’. Not everything that exists (real) is actual (wirklich). The misunderstanding of this is at the basis of most misinterpretations of Hegel’s *Philosophy of right* and his thesis of the rationality of reality: *Wirklichkeit* is rational, not *Realität*. This problematic ambiguity of the English (and Italian, Spanish, etc.) generic ‘real’ posits further problems. I think this is the reason why Adorno prefers ‘objective’ (Adorno 1990).
5. In my opinion, these issues implicitly emerge reading the overviews by Toscano (2008), Redolfi Riva (2013), Engster (2016). This also seems to be the background of the debate on Marx’s method: if Marx had a logic-historic or just logical method. The question is if ‘real’ (in the sense of extra-theoretical) elements constitute or not, each time, a necessary passage to move forward in the logic development, or if the intrinsic logical necessity moves forward by itself, once the ‘economic cell’ is set, the *Ausgangskategorie*. This is one of most relevant focuses in the so-called *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, but also in the debate among philologists in the former Democratic German Republic. On this see Fineschi (2009). On the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, see Elbe (2008), Bonefeld and Heinrich (2011), Reichelt (1973, 2008), Backhaus (1997).
6. ‘On the one hand, all labour is, speaking physiologically, an expenditure of human labour power, and in its character of identical abstract human labour, it creates and forms the value of commodities. On the other hand, all labour is the expenditure of human labour power in a special form and with a definite aim, and in this, its character of concrete useful labour, it produces use values’ (Marx 1996: 57; German: Marx 1991: 48).
7. See, among others, this passage: ‘Each satisfies the needs of many, and the satisfaction of one’s own many particular needs is the labor of many others. Since his labor is abstract in this way, he behaves as an abstract I—according to the mode of thinghood—not as an all-encompassing Spirit, rich in content, ruling a broad range arid being master of it; but rather, having no concrete labor, his power consists in analyzing, in abstracting, dissecting the concrete world into Its’ many abstract aspects. Man’s labor itself becomes entirely mechanical, belonging to a many-sided determinacy. But the more abstract [his labor] becomes, the more he himself is mere abstract

- activity. And consequently he is in a position to withdraw himself from labor and to substitute for his own activity that of external nature. He needs mere motion, and this he finds in external nature. In other words, pure motion is precisely the relation of the abstract forms of space and time—the abstract external activity, *the machine*’ (Hegel 1983: 121).
8. Cfr. Hegel (1991), §§ 191–192, and in particular §198: ‘The universal and objective aspect of work consists, however, in that [process of] *abstraction* which confers a specific character on means and needs and hence also on production, so giving rise to the *division of labour*. Through this division, the work of the individual [*des Einzelnen*] becomes *simpler*, so that his skill at his abstract work [*abstrakten Arbeit*] becomes greater, as does the volume of his output. At the same time, this abstraction of skill and means makes the *dependence* and *reciprocity* of human beings in the satisfaction of their other needs complete and entirely necessary. Furthermore, the abstraction of production makes work increasingly *mechanical*, so that the human being is eventually able to step aside and let a *machine* take his place’. See also §204. A similar argument in the *Encyclopædia*, Hegel (2007), §§ 525–526.
 9. See Section 4 of Part 4 of *Capital*, Book 1: ‘Division of labour in manufacture, and division of labour in society’ (Marx 1996: 356; German: Marx 1991: 316).
 10. Cfr. Marx (1975): 237 and ff; German: Marx (1982): 197 and ff. I don’t write *Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts of ‘44*, because, according to the philological results, those texts don’t actually exist as a book. The notes were extrapolated from their context, put together thematically and published as a book. For a general introduction to the new critical edition, the second *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA²), see Bellofiore and Fineschi (2009).
 11. See the famous passages of Chapter 7 of *Capital* Book 1 (Marx 1996: 187 and ff.; Chapter 5 in the German edition: Marx 1991: 161 and ff.). See Jungnickel (1988, 1989) on Marx’s modifications in the second German edition, which explicitly aims at distinguishing labor and labor process.
 12. I think that this is the most relevant contribution of the most significant Italian interpreters of Marx, starting with Luporini (1966, 1972, 1975), and then with Cazzaniga (1981), and Mazzone (1976, 1981, 1987).
 13. Cfr. Marx (1996): 509–510; German: Marx (1991): 456–457: ‘In considering the labour process, we began (see Chapter V) by treating it in the abstract, apart from its historical forms, as a process between man and Nature [...] So far as the labour process is purely individual, one and the same labourer unites in himself all the functions, that later on become separated. When an individual appropriates natural objects for his livelihood, no one controls him but himself. Afterwards he is controlled by

others. A single man cannot operate upon Nature without calling his own muscles into play under the control of his own brain. As in the natural body head and hand wait upon each other, so the labour process unites the labour of the hand with that of the head. Later on they part company and even become deadly foes. The product ceases to be the direct product of the individual, and becomes a social product, produced in common by a collective labourer [*Gesamtarbeiter*], i.e., by a combination of workmen, each of whom takes only a part, greater or less, in the manipulation of the subject of their labour. As the co-operative character of the labour process becomes more and more marked, so, as a necessary consequence, does our notion of productive labour, and of its agent the productive labourer, become extended. In order to labour productively, it is no longer necessary for you to do manual work yourself; enough, if you are an organ of the collective labourer, and perform one of its subordinate functions. The first definition given above of productive labour, a definition deduced from the very nature of the production of material objects, still remains correct for the collective labourer, considered as a whole. But it no longer holds good for each member taken individually’.

14. How a socialized production process can be controlled and rationally managed by a socialized worker is, of course, a big open question; it is not even guaranteed that it might be possible to find an answer. However, it seems solid that this was the perspective Marx was moving to.
15. ‘Within the relationship between value and the expression of value contained therein, the abstract universal does not count as a property of the concrete in its sense-reality, but on the contrary the concrete-sensate counts merely as the phenomenal or determinate form of the abstract universal’s realization. The labour of the tailor which one finds, e.g., in the equivalent coat, does not incidentally have the general property of being human labour within its value-relation as cloth. On the contrary: To be human labour is its very essence; to be the labour of the tailor is only the phenomenal or determinate form taken by this its essence in its realization. This quid pro quo is inevitable, since the labour represented in the labour-product creates value only in that it is undifferentiated human labour; such that the labour objectified in the value of a product is not at all distinguishable from the labour objectified in the value of another product’. And Marx concludes thus: ‘This total reversal and overturning, which means that the concrete-sensate counts only as the phenomenal form of the abstract-universal, and not contrariwise the abstract-universal as a property of the concrete, characterizes the expression of value. This is what makes its understanding difficult. If I say that Roman law and German law are both forms of law, this is obvious. If, however, I say that the law, this abstraction, translates itself into reality in Roman law and German law—

- these concrete forms of laws—then what emerges is a mystical connexion’. The English translation is quoted from Colletti (1973): 281–282. For the original, see Marx (1983): 634.
16. I don’t think that this alleged conflict of essence and appearance is what Marx means with ‘contradiction’. On Marx’s theory of contradiction see Fineschi (2001), Cazzaniga (1981).
 17. In light of this complex methodological argument, it seems to me that it is not correct to claim that Marx’s method is revocable (see Reichelt 1973). What is historically determined is the specific logic of the specific object; at the same time, it is implicit that every mode of production has its own logic, therefore the idea of a specific logic of a specific object is generally valid. The methodological principle of the descent from concrete to abstract and back from abstract to concrete can be used in order to find new *Ausgangskategorien*, whose specific dialectical development is based on their intrinsic contradiction. Marx did not say that his dialectical method is valid only for the capitalist mode of production.
 18. Some add that the system would produce alienated ‘abstract labor’, and it is mostly meant, as we have seen, the progressive parcelization of the total human subject because of the capitalistic production system. I have tried to show how the textual evidence doesn’t support the use of abstract labor for this case.

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Marx's Method and the Use of Abstraction

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1. On several occasions, Marx emphasized the absurdity of placing the isolated individual at the origin of social development and the historical process. In *Forms which precede capitalist production*, he observes how simple it is to imagine that a powerful man can exploit another man ‘as another naturally occurring condition for his reproduction’ (Marx 1973: 430), and direct his efforts specifically to make other men work for him, that is assuming a division of labor between master and servant even before establishing the fundamental requirements for the reproduction of human life, ‘But such a notion is stupid—correct as it may be from the standpoint of some particular given clan or commune—because it proceeds from the development of isolated individuals. But human beings become individuals only through the process of history’ (Marx 1973: 430).

The question posed by Marx is obviously not new. Ferguson, for example, had already supported the need to consider the human species as groups and to conduct a socio-historical investigation which chooses as its object the whole of society and not men considered individually (Ferguson 1995: 10 ff.). In general, all of the ‘Scottish School of Historiography’

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had posed the problem of studying human history, starting from men gathered in a society, and had stressed that the key factor for understanding the development of different societies was the ‘means of subsistence’ (Robertson 1818: 111; Millar 1960: 175), from which customs, laws, and forms of government could be derived. In this regard, it has been argued that Marx was a successor of the so-called ‘Scottish School’ (Pascal 1938: 178), and that his materialistic conception of history had been anticipated by Ferguson, Millar, and Robertson. It has been noted that in France too, in the eighteenth century, Quesnay, Mirabeau, and Turgot had advanced a materialistic theory of history (Meek 1973), which can be regarded as the foundation of political economics as a standalone science. The idea that understanding the institutions and customs of different societies requires an investigation into the material conditions resulting in these differences paved the way for political economics to become a separate discipline, as it analyzed the structure of civil society. Political economics becomes the key to understanding the whole of society. But there’s a problem here. Having established a connection between the materialistic conception of history and political economics in the eighteenth century, there is however an open question with respect to Marx: do his thoughts extend the concepts developed in the eighteenth century to definitively reduce the explanation of capitalist society to its economic basis, or is his way of combining the materialistic theory of history and his critique of political economics aimed at preventing this reduction—a reduction only present in the attempts of classical economists to construct a standalone economic science? There is at least one aspect of Marx’s analysis that allows us, if not exhaustively, at least to highlight from a different perspective the meaning of this very widely debated question. It is the connection that Marx makes between his critique of the isolated man, placed at the origin of history, and the critique of the use by classical economists of this concept in their attempt to construct a simplified economic model capable of explaining the complex economic mechanism of the capitalist means of production.

The role of abstraction in Marx’s critique and method comes into play here. Alfred Sohn-Rethel observed that Marx derives from Hegel the idea of form as shaped by time, but he distances himself from it because, unlike Hegel, he ‘understands the time governing the genesis and the mutation of forms as being, from the very first, historical time—the time of natural and human history. That is why the form processes cannot be made out in anticipation. No *prima philosophia* under any guise has a place in Marxism.

What is to be asserted must first be established by investigation; historical materialism is merely the name for a methodological postulate and even this only became clear to Marx “as a result of my studies” (Sohn-Rethel 1978: 18).

The problem that we want to discuss here is whether Marx's critique is the result of an interaction between the materialistic conception of history and political economics—that is, an internal critique of a previously initiated theoretical process which nevertheless contains a defect or a contradiction in this attempt to resort to the isolated man for the construction of a simple model—or if it opens the field to a different way of interpreting this theoretical entity, proposing a connection between the theory of history and economic theory, so as to offer us some food for thought on the role that the field of economics plays, in Marx, within various areas of society. In short, we aim to ascertain if reductionism of society to its economic key points plays a part, or not, in Marx's work. In order to do that, it is essential to understand the role of abstraction in Marx's theoretical way of proceeding.

2. It is well-known that Marx begins the 1857 *Introduction* with criticism of Smith and Ricardo's starting point for political economics. He states that ‘Individuals producing in Society—hence socially determined individual production—is, of course, the point of departure’ (Marx 1973: 25). The starting point for Smith and Ricardo is instead made up of ‘The individual and isolated hunter and fisherman’ which, says Marx, ‘belongs among the unimaginative conceits of the eighteenth-century Robinsonades, which in no way express merely a reaction against over-sophistication and a return to a misunderstood natural life, as cultural historians imagine’ (Marx 1973: 25); they represent instead an anticipation of the ‘civil society’ (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*), where free competition gives rise to the individual freed from those natural limitations, ‘which in earlier historical periods make him the accessory of a definite and limited human conglomerate’ (Marx 1973: 25).

Here Marx offers a double criticism: one concerns the starting point of classical economists, and the other, the kind of explanation that ‘historians of civilization’ (*Kulturhistoriker*) have tried to give for a model of society based on isolated man in a natural state. At stake is the kind of abstraction used by economists. Let us dwell for the moment on this second criticism. We can reasonably suppose that Marx, when referring to ‘historians of civilization’, had Ferguson in mind, amongst others. In his *Essay on History of Civil Society*, where he claims that it is wrong to write the history of

individuals on their own, Ferguson is adversarial to the idea of an imaginary natural state, ‘Among the various qualities which mankind possess, we select one or a few particulars on which to establish a theory, and in framing our account of what man was in some imaginary state of nature, we overlook what he has always appeared within the reach of our own observation, and in the records of history’ (Ferguson 1995: 8).

Ferguson uses the comparative analysis between the customs of Americans and the customs of the ancients that Lafitau had carried out in an attempt to demonstrate, through comparison and analogy, the unique origin of the human race (Lafitau 1724).¹ Finding empirical evidence that under similar material conditions, people develop similar customs and laws, Ferguson criticizes the theoretical notion that attributes certain qualities to man in his original natural state, since he sees in it the idea of perfecting the human race, and in general of the development of civilization as a progressive departure from primordial human nature. By contrast, human nature is evident both in wild and in civilized man, since man, in whatever social state he is found, ‘only follows the disposition, and employs the powers that nature has given’ (Ferguson 1995: 14).

On the other hand, if it is true that a palace is not natural, it is just as unnatural as a hut, and it does not represent a stepwise departure from a hypothetical original state. From the point of view of historical analysis, it is not possible to trace the origins of social conditions, since there are no appropriate documents or witnesses (Ferguson 1995: 7), and the danger of speculating on these origins is that we end up thinking that everything known historically about the human species is extraneous to the nature of man. What Ferguson essentially criticizes Rousseau for is that his natural man, hypothesized for the purpose of denouncing the evils of civilization and society (founded on inequality among men), is not only historically unascertainable, but presupposes a theory of the individual—based on the nature–society dichotomy—which cannot become the object of historical analysis.

If we are asked therefore, Where the state of nature is to be found? We may answer, it is here; and it matters not whether we are understood to speak in the island of Great Britain, at the Capo of Good Hope, or the Straits of Magellan. While this active being is in the train of employing his talents, and of operating on the subjects around him, all situations are equally natural. If we are told, that vice, at least, is contrary to nature; we may answer, It is worse; it is folly and wretchedness. But if nature is only opposed to art, in

what situation of the human race are footsteps of art unknown? In the condition of the savage, as well as in that of the citizen, are many proofs of human invention; and in either is not any permanent station, but a mere stage through which this travelling being is destined to pass. (Ferguson 1995: 14)

Ferguson's critique of Rousseau stops at this point: denouncing vice to be contrary to nature does not necessarily imply denouncing what Ferguson ascribes to human nature, that is the capacity to progress as a species. Precisely because the conception of the original state of man cannot be anything but conjecture, Rousseau's denunciation has no sound theoretical basis, and should be explained as merely a reaction to the vices which arise in developed societies. Ferguson's polemic has both a theoretical and political character: in fact it is well-known that, using his chosen method, he was able to highlight the evils derived from the capitalist division of labor; only that for Ferguson it makes no sense to point out these evils using the image of a man in his original natural state as opposed to historical, civilized man: this contrast makes us forget that the evils of civilized society are intrinsic to that peculiar characteristic of human nature, of developing and progressing as a species. It is within this development and progress that the historical contradictions of society must be sought and not through comparison with an imaginary state of man. We know that Marx was very attentive to the issue of the human species, since it allowed, at a theoretical level, the understanding of the historical possibility of a communist social organization starting from the contradictions inherent in the development of cooperation among men.

We also know that in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, he contrasts Ferguson's analysis of the capitalist division of labor with that of Proudhon, who in his attempt to criticize capitalist society and the forms of the division of labor that characterize it, adopts an image of the original natural state as one in which independent men enter into contracts with one another. In the 1857 *Introduction*, moreover, Marx's criticism looks back to the starting point of Smith and Ricardo, having in mind Bastiat, Carey, and Proudhon, who perpetuate the error in the image of 'the individual and isolated hunter and fisherman'. But compared to Ferguson, in the critique of the imaginary natural man, Marx shifts the axis of the problem: not only is there the question of the historical existence, or not, of this imaginary man, but there is also the other question about the historical-theoretical meaning of such a concept; he is not merely criticizing the use of conjec-

tures in historical analysis, but also the epistemological sense of these conjectures and of those concepts. While Ferguson's criticism simply identifies an erroneous historical method which establishes comparisons between reality and an artificially constructed concept, Marx starts from the problem of the genesis of such a concept from social reality. That's why he says that 'the individual and isolated hunter and fisherman' does not represent a reaction to excessive refinements and a return to a misunderstood natural life, but constitutes the anticipation of 'civil society'.

Here we are faced with a new aspect of the relationship that Marx establishes between the materialistic conception of history and the critique of political economics: his theory of history allows him to address an epistemological problem that economists had to face in their investigation of the capitalist economic system: of constructing, through an abstraction, a simplified economic model for comparison against the real one. Marx emphasizes the fact that man in a natural state, rather than being an inverted mirror to negative criticism of civilization's effects, comes across as the image of a bourgeois economic individual transcending his society. This image, which anticipates the 'civil society' (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*), does nothing more than reduce capitalist social relations to simple and abstract economic terms. An abstraction, therefore, of social relationships reduced to economic relationships: Marx's critique of the isolated man as the starting point of history and as a starting point for political economics stands as a critique of this reductive abstraction, in an attempt to restore the connection between economic and socio-historical relationships. Let us now examine Marx's second criticism, the one at the starting point of classical economists.

For Marx, the image of the 'the individual and isolated hunter and fisherman' is simultaneously a simplified abstraction and an expression of common bourgeois thinking, or rather a simplified abstraction deriving from common bourgeois thinking. This apparently concrete image, which is in reality abstract, is in fact opposed to 'civil society' precisely because it is constructed upon the structure of the latter. In fact, precisely because an individual within 'civil society' appears to be free of natural limitations, he is nevertheless part of nature, imbued with his own historical characteristics. The individual of the eighteenth century, says Marx, 'appears as an idea, whose existence they project into the past. Not as a historic result but as history's point of departure. As the Natural Individual appropriate to their notion of human nature, not arising historically, but posited by nature' (Marx 1973: 25).

What interests Marx is precisely the idea that economists make human nature into the linchpin of simple abstraction with which to compare the means of capitalist production. The problem of classical economists was to construct a synchronic model capable of representing the economic categories of capitalist society and of explaining the value of commodities. It was necessary to find a simple abstraction that would allow categories to be generalized; and just as Rousseau conceived of the natural state not as a real state, but as an abstraction with which to compare civilized society, economists had to resort to an abstract model, but with the seemingly concrete appearance of 'the individual and isolated hunter and fisherman', able to represent all the different facets of value. And while Ferguson was arguing that conjectures on man's supposed original state made no sense from a historical point of view, Adam Smith had to resort to this same original state to explain the economic point of view.

Similarly, while Turgot, in his writings on progress, also placed the emphasis on the development of the human species in its different stages, rather than on the contractarian idea of originally independent and isolated men, when he found himself having to formalize the theory of value, he had to resort to the isolated man or to men who enter into relationships with each other as independent (Turgot, about 1769). In the eighteenth century, a conflict arose between the features of historical analysis and the features of economic analysis. Thanks to the first attempts of comparative anthropology, it started to be possible in socio-historical research to apply a procedure to understand differences between different historically known social stages as variations in the faculties of the human species, that is as variations found in the characteristics of human nature, expressed and developed in societies. In economic research, on the other hand, the procedure presupposed a conception of human nature whose peculiarity, valid for all epochs, is ideally and abstractly expressed in a hypothetical pre-social stage.

Marx deals with this second procedure; his problem is not only to put historical analysis back on a firm footing, but to understand the process of simplification/generalization in the models of political economics and therefore the method of abstraction. It is from this point of view that one must interpret his critique of the starting point of political economics as a function of the question of the origins of human societies; that is, from the point of view of the construction of a theoretical model capable of offering a general representation of the capitalist means of production.

Marx criticizes the abstraction used by Smith and Ricardo because it assumes the isolated individual as a starting point for political economics. And he argues that the further back we look in history, the more the individual can be seen as part of a community; ‘Only in the eighteenth century, in “civil society”, do the various forms of social connectedness confront the individual as a mere means towards his private purposes, as external necessity’ (Marx 1973: 26). Only in the era when social relationships are most developed, in the capitalist era, do the forms of relationships, based on individuals detached from the community and independent of each other, ultimately appear to dominate the material production of wealth.

Classical economists, according to Marx, construct their abstraction based on this appearance: considering as natural the bourgeois individual, who considers himself as free from natural limitations, means projecting the way we see the current reality into the past. But how does such a projection take place? How is it possible to abolish historical differences to construct a simple model that replicates capitalist activity and shows its internal dynamics? Or, put another way, why does it not make sense for Marx to construct an abstraction that has no connection with history? If we start from the observation that on the level of historical analysis the myth of the original state of man was fading away, we must note that this myth reappears when it becomes necessary to build an ahistorical model, where it is necessary to reduce the social characteristics of an individual to his economic contents. It is exactly such a reduction that homogenizes the abstraction of ‘the individual and isolated hunter and fisherman’ with the means of capitalist production, and it is this homogeneity that erroneously leads economists to create the differences between a simple abstraction and a complex model. Marx’s criticism is aimed exactly at this theoretical process of homogenization of the two models, since it is based precisely on the reduction of the social individual to the economic individual, a reduction made possible historically only through the means of capitalist production. Consequently, it can be extended to other means of production or to the origins of human society *only* as a *bad abstraction*, that is, as an inappropriate projection of historical reality onto an ahistorical, natural, and universalizing scenario. The individual feels free from the natural limitations that bind him to society as soon as he can consider the latter as a means for his private ends, and this means that society appears as a pure economic means to be used for one’s own needs. This concept conceals

the fact that satisfying private needs takes place under the pretext of exploitative relationships that underlie the social character of commodities.

On the contrary, the transfer of this social character from men to commodities ultimately implies that the domain of private life is also invested with purely utilitarian economic relationships. Therefore, the reduction of society to economic society is presented as the deceptive and erroneous epistemological premise of the birth of political economics as a science: the individual, in nature, is the economic individual of the capitalist system. From this point of view, it is possible to explain all the determinations of value. Marx admits this when he mentions Robinson Crusoe. In the chapter on *The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof* in Book I of *Das Kapital*, Marx describes Crusoe, who, in his isolation, clarifies the relations between himself and his things. It is an abstraction deriving from his isolation: in this representation, in fact, both the cooperative nature of labor and the relationships between men, mediated by goods, are taken away at the very start. Crusoe presents himself as one 'having rescued a watch, ledger, and pen and ink from the wreckage' (Marx 1887: 50), that is, objects needed for his survival, and which were produced by the labor of society.

The transparency provided by the figure of Crusoe derives from the total abstraction of the social character of private labor and therefore of the social relationships of private labor, summarized perfectly in one person. But clock, ledger, pen and inkwell ultimately point out how the origin of Crusoe's behavior in isolation is at odds with his possibility of a private relationship with things. However, 'All the relations between Robinson and the objects that form this wealth of his own creation, are here so simple and clear as to be intelligible without exertion, even to Mr. Sedley Taylor. And yet those relations contain all that is essential to the determination of value' (Marx 1887: 50).

The point that Marx criticizes about Smith and Ricardo's 'Crusoean' things is not that they give no account of value determination, but that in the idealized reintroduction of the figure of 'the individual and isolated hunter and fisherman', the social aspect of economic relationship is lost. The savage of Adam Smith, who rationally discovers the advantage of specializing in the production of objects and then bartering with others who need them, ideally also owns a watch, ledger, pen and inkwell, but these objects do not appear only because of the absence, in an abstract sense, of the social aspect on which the rational utility of bartering is based. The reduction of reason to pure economic rationality becomes the abstraction

that characterizes human civilization, willing to sacrifice the immediate satisfaction of needs for a calculated larger final utility derived from labor and abstinence. Modern anthropology has shown that exchange relationships among primitive peoples are not necessarily connected to economic calculations based on satisfying material and primary needs. Malinowski questioned the idea of ‘Primitive Economic Man’, acting according to a calculation of their interests and to achieve their goals according to the criterion of minimum effort. *The Trobriand islander ‘works prompted by motives of a highly complex, social and traditional nature, and towards aims which are certainly not directed towards the satisfaction of present wants, or to the direct achievement of utilitarian purposes. Thus ... work is not carried out on the principle of the least effort. On the contrary, much time and energy is spent on wholly unnecessary effort, that is, from a utilitarian point of view’* (Malinowski 1932: 40).

Mauss claims: ‘apparently there has never existed, either in an era fairly close in time to our own, or in societies that we lump together somewhat awkwardly as primitive or inferior, anything that might resemble what is called a “natural economy”’ (Mauss 2002: 6). Polanyi, in turn, maintains that in a primitive community there is no standalone existence of economics, and he asks ‘whether awareness of an economic sphere would not tend to reduce his capacity of spontaneous response to the needs of livelihood, organized as they are mainly through other than economic channels’ (Polanyi 1957: 70). All this obviously leads to the conclusion that the idea of capitalist economic rationality cannot be applied to primitive peoples. But the question posed by Marx goes beyond such an affirmation. His critique of the epistemological homogenization of a simple abstraction and a complex model against which it is to be compared seems to imply something else. The image of ‘the individual and isolated hunter and fisherman’ is nothing more than an abstraction, that of the natural state of bourgeois economic man in his intentional and conscious relationships, while the aim of political economics is to lay out the logic of the unintentional relationships through which moments of awareness arise.

In the Preface to the first edition of Book 1 of *Das Kapital*, Marx writes: ‘I paint the capitalist and the landlord in no sense *couleur de rose*. But here individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class-interests’ (Marx 1887: 7). Even the image of ‘the individual and isolated hunter and fisherman’ is nothing more than the personification of

certain economic relationships, but a personification which, located at the origins of society, is presented as an intentional cause of those very relationships that it should represent and explain. Precisely this way of proceeding puts the lie to the homogenization between simple abstraction and complex model: there cannot be homogeneity between a simple abstraction in which individuals decide to establish economic relationships and a complex model in which they are an expression of unintentional economic relationships. Therefore, even in the case of a theoretical comparison which does not take into account the real historical process, the question of homogeneity between the two models remains unresolved. Not only that, but the image of economic man at the origins of society, as the abstract personification of missing social relationships, leads to society being reduced to economic society. The ideology of the economic man and of his self-serving rationality abstractly reduces all social relationships to economic means, and it is precisely this abstraction that Marx attempts to debunk in order to understand social relationships in the context of economic relationships.

3. Marx's preoccupation with the starting point of political economics is linked to the fact that Smith and Ricardo's error in placing the individual as the original state of production reappears in those he calls 'apologist economists'. In their work, unlike in classical works, the use of the image of the individual, isolated and independent at the origins of society, extends to the point of shaping all of their economic analysis: ideology ends up having the upper hand over economic analysis. 'The point could go entirely unmentioned if this twaddle, which had sense and reason for the eighteenth-century characters, had not been earnestly pulled back into the centre of the most modern economics by Bastiat, Carey, Proudhon, et al' (Marx 1973: 26).

In Carey, Bastiat and Proudhon, the image of the isolated man presents itself as an abstract and incongruous generalization to the whole field of economic analysis, since it is no longer identified only with the problem of epistemological simplification, but becomes a total reversal of the analysis. In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, criticizing the way in which Proudhon defines the relationship between exchange value and utility value, Marx shows how his method is like a 'Robinsonade', as it invariably presupposes what cannot be presupposed and should be explained historically: from the need that overcomes spontaneous production, to the division of labor, to exchange.

How does M. Proudhon, who assumes the division of labour as the known, manage to explain exchange value, which for him is always the unknown? ‘A man’ sets out to ‘*propose* to other men, his collaborators in various functions,’ that they establish exchange, and make a distinction between ordinary value and exchange value ... to tell us finally how this single individual, this Robinson, suddenly had the idea of making ‘to his collaborators’ a proposal of the type known and how these collaborators accepted it without the slightest protest. (Marx 1955: 12)

According to Marx, Proudhon is still wedded to the idea of the social pact that independent men have made amongst themselves. Men make proposals to other men and determine the nature of the exchanges: those proposals and decisions conceal the historical origin that must explain the voluntary actions of men. ‘What is society, irrespective of its form? The product of man’s interaction upon man. Is man free to choose this or that form of society? By no means’ (Marx 1975: 95). In this letter, Marx speaks of society as a product of mutual actions between men—actions determined by objective conditions found in the different spheres in which these actions occur, not only in the economic sphere; however, economics remains key to a fundamental explanation, precisely because it is in capitalist economic relations that the fetishism of commodities represents the world for what it actually is, that is reversed. Commodities exist in and of themselves and embody the social manifestation of private labor: they are therefore the basis of the division, in the capitalist system, between social relationships (embedded and represented therein) and individual relationships. Commodities incorporate the social nature of private labor and thus hide their origins while simultaneously being present to the world, which leads to their fetishist nature. The crystallization of social relationships within the realm of commodities (i.e. rejecting their nature of relationships and processes) becomes the structure through which such relationships are perceived as things, and as ways to satisfy private economic needs. Society is thus reduced to economic society, and the sphere of circulation conceals the social relationships that preside over the sphere of production.

This sphere that we deserting, within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour-power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, say of labour-power, are constrained only by their own free will. They contract as free agents, and the

agreement they come to, is but the form in which they give legal expression to their common will. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham, because each looks only to himself. The only force that brings them together and puts them in relation with each other, is the selfishness, the gain and the private interests of each. (Marx 1887: 7)

The fact that commodities are repositories of social labor leads to two consequences: (a) the reduction of the process of social labor, and therefore of production relationships, to something simple; (b) the demarcation of subjectivity, of its intentional space of action, to the sphere of circulation, where social labor, crystallized in commodities, circulates within the orbit of economic interests. Once the workforce is treated as a commodity, as dead labor, its subjectivity is recognized only in its circulation. It is exactly the undervaluation of these two consequences that leads Marx to criticize Bastiat and Carey. With regard to the latter, Marx observes that he belongs to a country, the USA, in which bourgeois society has not developed from feudal society and therefore is seen as a starting point for a new movement. ‘That the relations of production within which this enormous new world has developed so quickly, so surprisingly and so happily should be regarded by Carey as the eternal, normal relations of social production and intercourse (...)?’ (Marx 1973: 806).

And here too, the activity of informed individuals determines social relationships and the development of productive forces within a harmonious vision of the economic system. Here we see clearly how Marx considers history to be the key distinguishing factor: ‘but the unhistoric moment in Carey is the contemporary historic principle of North America, while the unhistoric element in Bastiat is a mere reminiscence of the French eighteenth-century manner generalizing’ (Marx 1973: 810). Criticizing the way Bastiat explains wages in the *Harmonies Economiques*, Marx nevertheless stresses the method of explaining the relationship between capital and wage labor as stemming from an agreement between the capitalist and the wage earner: ‘We will not call attention here to the genius of a procedure which begins by presupposing a capitalist on one side and a worker on the other, so as then, afterwards, to let the relation of capital and wage labour arise between them by their mutual agreement’ (Marx 1973: 812).

Bastiat presents the production relationships between capitalist and worker as intentional and voluntary relationships in the form in which they appear in circulation. Circulation is then proposed as the exclusive field of intentionality: but moving intentional action into the sphere of relationships means both denying the possibility of grasping the objectivity of the production relationships, and preventing to bring to light the antagonistic nature of the actions of individuals from the context of such relationships.² Bastiat's is a bad abstraction.

In Marx, economics remains the preferred field of his investigation, but he does not reduce all social relationships to the domain of economic relationships. If we consider carefully Marx's criticism of apologist economists, we realize that, according to Marx, key to explaining them is the sphere of circulation, one in which there is the appearance of free and intentional relationships. And we see too that this sphere is one in which economic relationships based on independent individuals who exchange commodities, to the extent that they hide the social nature of the labor embodied in the commodities, are seen as the only or the main social relationships. In this sense there is a reduction of the social to the economic, and paradoxically, this happens precisely at the moment when the social nature of economic relationships, in the sphere of circulation, is most strongly asserted as the sphere of *free* relationships. But since the social nature of economic relationships is a given prerequisite for the free and intentional actions of men, it comes naturally. In this way we come to realize the observation that Galiani had made on value, the origin of which, according to Galiani, must in the first instance be sought in man himself (Galiani 1963: 97). This observation was revived by Turgot in a failed attempt to prove the theory of value (Turgot 1769: 85 ff) and in the *idéologues* (Destutt de Tracy) finally assumed a process of abstraction of this kind: natural rules as the cause of the social rules and, in the case in point, of economic rules. Marx's point of view is instead that of considering the specificity of the economy as an object of investigation, from which the social aspect of mutual actions between men emerges. In this sense, political economics represents precisely the structure of civil society.

4. We started from Marx's critique of Smith and Ricardo's attempt to use 'the individual and isolated hunter and fisherman' to build a simplified model capable of measuring the complex economic model of the capitalist system. Marx criticizes this attempt, considering it a bad abstraction based on the fact that the difference between the simple and complex models is not supported by an underlying homogeneity, but only by an idealized

transposition of the social relationships of production (as they appear in the sphere of circulation), on to the sphere of social relationships of production. The assessment then takes place between an abstraction coming from the sphere of circulation and a complex model coming from the sphere of production. Thus the assessment of the capitalist machinery is nothing more than what remains to be explained by the sphere yet to be assessed, that of production. This is exactly what Marx ascribes to Bastiat, Carey and Proudhon. A symptom of the theoretical paradox deriving from this type of abstraction is the naturalization of the economic man endowed with rationality and utilitarian will. From this comes Marx's criticism of the idea that, at the origin of the conditions of production, the economic relationship between private, isolated individuals within the sphere of circulation are presented as natural social relationships. In this way the social character of private labor that allow men to have mutual relationships as isolated individuals, can be dismissed and with it the whole social sphere of economic relationships deriving from production. The myth of *primitive economic man*, subject to criticism by anthropologists (Malinowski 1932; Mauss 2002; Polanyi 1957),³ is in reality the theoretical myth of the idealized transposition of the relationships of the sphere of circulation to the relationships of the sphere of production, a transposition that denies the possibility of including the historical differential method within the abstraction of an economic model, for the simple reason that this method presupposes an internal analysis of the sphere of human action in question and not a transposition between different spheres.

Marx finds himself at odds with those apologist economists who use the *Wealth of Nations* as a 'paradigm' to transform an abstract representation of the capitalist system into a sort of incongruous generalization. But Marx's criticism goes beyond this aspect, since the insertion of historical analysis into the idealized model as a genetically different stage (Luporini 1974) comes across as a break with the classical approach. Rather than complete the approach initiated by Smith and Ricardo, Marx embarks on a new approach, one that advocates the need to rethink society as a whole starting by investigating the capitalist means of production. But to do this he had to demolish the naturalistic aspects present in the determination of the economy, which made the intentions present in the sphere of circulation appear as natural qualities.

While for the apologist economists the naturalization of individual economic intentions resulted in the reduction of society to the elements determined by economic circulation, in Marx the reversal of this relation-

ship toward a search, inspired by the classics, for the unintentional relations inherent in production relationships, allows a new discourse on the topic of subjectivity to be opened up. The naturalization of social relationships as they arise in the sphere of the commodity circulation, the Eden of man's innate rights (i.e. as relationships between isolated and independent individuals), implies that social action derives only from that of abstract homogenization among individuals who have the same interest in defending themselves against others with opposed interests. Hence the idea of the social pact as the 'anticipation of civil society' and as a great metaphor for the class behavior of the bourgeoisie, which abstractly conceives of the intentional relationships of the sphere of circulation as the relationships of all the spheres of mutual actions between men, 'where every man is in it for himself'. Thus the myth of the isolated man is nothing more than the abstraction within this single figure of all those aspects of human action that are seen separately in capitalist society. As a result of the socio-historical process, it reveals its origins from the capitalist conditions of production, the division of labor and the private appropriation of social work. This unveiling, by destroying that myth, represents the isolation of the individual for what it actually is when the capitalist process of expropriation of labor rules: the reality is having to deal only with oneself in relationships with others, with loneliness as the only moment to search for one's fragmented individuality.

For this reason, Marx's critique of 'the individual and isolated hunter and fisherman' overcomes the epistemological discussion of abstraction. The reference to production and its capitalist nature, on which the circulation of commodities and the social behavior of isolated individuals is based, also indicates the need to find a commonality between the working class and the proletariat different from that of the bourgeoisie, the conquest of an organized and mass conscience that, starting from the fight against the private appropriation of social labor, reverses the visibility offered by the relationships between men in the sphere of commodity circulation, and funds its unity not only in the opportunity to defend itself against a common enemy, but also in the permanent ability to translate that struggle into the open visibility of the social appropriation of social labor. From this point of view, the search for sociality through commodities and for dismembered individuality among the separate spheres of

human action will perhaps prevent solitude from destroying the possibility of reconstituting the social individual. Despite globalization, the great changes in the organization and division of labor, and in the ways people and environment are exploited, this research still deserves to be pursued.

NOTES

1. I have explored the subject at length in Iacono (1994, 2016).
2. On the relation between capital and capitalist, Marx observes: ‘(...) capital in its being-for-itself is the *capitalist*. Of course, socialists sometimes say, we need capital, but not the capitalist. Then capital appears as a pure thing, not as a relation of production which, reflected in itself, is precisely the capitalist’ (Marx 1973: 242).
3. Malinowski grossly misunderstands historical materialism as he equates it to utilitarian economics, which he criticizes because accepts the myth of the primitive economic man (Malinowski 1932: 276).

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Method and Value: Engels Through Sohn-Rethel

Paul Blackledge

In this chapter I explore Friedrich Engels's contribution to twentieth-century Marxist political economy through the lens of Alfred Sohn-Rethel's work on real abstractions. Whereas Engels's reputation amongst theorists is at its nadir, and though his misunderstanding of value theory is not the least of the reasons for this situation, I want to argue that Engels remains relevant to contemporary thought (Blackledge 2019b, c, d). Specifically, I argue that the strengths and weaknesses of Sohn-Rethel's contribution to Marxism when understood in the context of his debt to Engels suggest that it would be a mistake to throw the baby of Engels's historical method out with the bathwater of his misunderstanding of value theory. For if it is unfortunate that Engels's comments on the historical method have been overwhelmed by criticisms of his concept of 'simple commodity production', the fact that his historical work informed work as important as Sohn-Rethel's suggests that it should not be easily dismissed.

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Sohn-Rethel aimed in his *Intellectual and Manual Labour* to fill a gap left by Marx and Engels in their account of the relationship between basis and superstructure in their theory of history. Whereas Engels argued that the basic question of philosophy ‘is that concerning the relation of thinking to being’ (Engels 1990b: 366; Thomson 1955: 321), Sohn-Rethel added that though Marx and Engels had outlined the general relationship between production and consciousness, they had not explained how this relationship worked. He thus set himself the task of articulating ‘a blueprint for the staircase that should lead from the base to the superstructure’ (Sohn-Rethel 1978: XI). To this end, he sought to historicize the emergence of abstract thinking, and he did so in part through an engagement with what he called Engels’s ‘powerful’ historical writings, especially as mediated through the work of George Thomson (Sohn-Rethel 1978: 96).

Sohn-Rethel argued that abstract thought emerged and developed as an expression of a developing monetary and commodity economy.

The essence of commodity abstraction ... is that it is not thought induced; it does not originate in men’s minds but in their actions. And yet this does not give “abstraction” a merely metaphorical meaning. The economic concept of value resulting from it is characterized by a complete absence of quality, a differentiation purely by quantity and by applicability to every kind of commodity and service which can occur on the market... It exists nowhere other than in the human mind but it does not spring from it. Rather it is purely social in character arising in the spatio-temporal sphere of human interrelations. It is not people who originate these abstractions but their actions. ‘They do this without being aware of it’. (Sohn-Rethel 1978: 21)

This is a profound argument in which, as Robert Albritton puts it, Sohn-Rethel shows that ‘abstraction is not only a mental exercise of subjects but also something that takes place through economic exchange relations’. It is ‘induced by exchange relations ... Every time an exchange takes place, qualitative differences are suppressed in order to arrive at a quantitative identity’ (Albritton 1999: 30; Žižek 1989: 16–21). The strength of this general approach has recently been reaffirmed by Richard Seaford who, building upon Sohn-Rethel’s insights, has made a strong case for that claim that ‘it is possible to relate the genesis of the ancient Greek idea of a unitary and transcendent self-consciousness to the historical process of *monetisation*’ (Seaford 2004, 2012: 81).

Seaford acknowledges that a similar thesis was developed by Sohn-Rethel’s friend and collaborator George Thomson in the 1950s (Seaford

2004: 188, 2012: 79). However, he does not explore the debt to Engels registered by both of these writers. This omission is unfortunate because their common debt to Engels's *Anti-Dubring* and *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* is a useful lens through which to illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of their arguments.

According to Thomson, Engels's definition of civilization is superior to that deployed by bourgeois archaeologists, because whereas the latter merely held to a descriptive model of civilization as 'the culture of cities', the former articulated a much more analytical account that treated civilization as the 'culmination of an organic process of economic and social change' (Thomson 1955: 175). Engels argued that civilization is the 'stage of development of society at which division of labour, the resulting exchange between individuals, and commodity production, which combines the two, reach their full development and revolutionize the whole of hitherto existing society' (Engels 1990a: 272; Thomson 1955: 175). This process, according to Thomson's gloss, emerged in the Bronze Age but did not come into its 'full growth' until the Iron Age, particularly in Greece (Thomson 1955: 178).

Engels claimed that '[t]he stages of commodity production, with which civilization began, is marked economically by the introduction of (1) metal money and, thus, of money capital, interest and usury; (2) the merchants acting as mediating class between producers; (3) private ownership of land and mortgage; (4) slave labour as the prevailing form of production' (Engels 1990a: 274). Interestingly, these lines are quoted with approval both by Thomson and by Sohn-Rethel, and in both cases they underpin their accounts of the moment when a full monetary economy first came into being (Thomson 1955: 177; Sohn-Rethel 1978: 95–96).

More specifically, Sohn-Rethel argues that 'Thomson confirmed and supported' Engels's conclusions that 'Greek society was the first to be based on a monetary economy' and that this process was significant because of the links between 'the rise of commodity production in Greece with the rise of Greek philosophy'. Sohn-Rethel went on to argue that he had distinguished between 'primitive exchange on the one hand and private commodity exchange on the other'. He insisted that '[t]he former was contemporary with the various forms of "communal modes of production" and evolved chiefly in the external relations between different tribal communities' whereas the latter emerged

[w]hen the productive forces developed further by the transition from Bronze to Iron Age communal food production was superseded by individual production combined with an exchange of a new kind, the private exchange of 'commodities'. 'Commodities' then answered the Marxian definition as 'products of the labour of private individuals who work independently of each other'. This kind of exchange - commodity exchange properly speaking - is the one which is characteristic of Greek antiquity. (Sohn-Rethel 1978: 98)

Whatever the undoubted strengths of this argument it is not without its problems. Terry Eagleton argues that there is what might be termed a 'reductionist flavour' to both Thomson's and Sohn-Rethel's work (Eagleton 1986: 124). Interestingly, Seaford recognized this problem, and in his attempt to extend Sohn-Rethel's thesis on the link between the emergence of money and Greek philosophy he sought to differentiate his arguments from the more reductionist aspects of Thomson's earlier version of this thesis (Seaford 2004: 188). This understandable attempt to improve on Thomson's thesis is somewhat weakened, however, by Seaford's failure to explore the Engelsian roots of Thomson's work for these arguments also inform Sohn-Rethel's work and through his ideas Seaford's own account of the 'genesis of the idea of the individual mind or soul as a unitary site of consciousness'. Engels's historical analysis is problematic because of his tendency to conflate what Sohn-Rethel labels commodity exchange proper with a system that was, according to Marx, at best only a stage toward a system of complete commodity exchange. Indeed, whereas Marx's analysis of the commodity form is the lens through which he explored capitalism as a distinct mode of production, Sohn-Rethel follows Engels in focusing not on a system of generalized commodity production in which labor power is itself a commodity, but rather on the monetary and commodity economy that developed in classical Greece.

The problem with this approach is perhaps best understood through the lens of Marx's comments on Aristotle. Though Marx registered his intellectual debt to this great thinker, he did so while pointing to the material roots of Aristotle's failure to grasp the labor theory of value. Aristotle, according to Marx, recognized that exchange assumes commensurability of seemingly incommensurable objects, but came to the conclusion that it is in practice impossible to compare such incommensurable objects. Marx comments that this argument reveals both the power of Aristotle's arguments—he recognized the limits of his own thought in his

lack of a concept of value—and the material roots of the limits of his thought: ‘Aristotle’s genius is displayed precisely by his discovery of a relation of equality in the value-expression of commodities. Only the historical limitation inherent in the society in which he lived prevented him from finding out what “in reality” this relation of equality consisted of’ (Marx 1976: 151–152).

In following Engels’s history, Sohn-Rethel effectively downplay the distinction Marx stressed between capitalist and pre-capitalist economies. Moishe Postone has argued that because Sohn-Rethel fails to ‘distinguish between a situation such as that in fifth-century Attica, where commodity production was widespread but by no means the dominant form of production, and capitalism, a situation in which the commodity form is totalizing. He is ... unable to ground socially the distinction, emphasized by Georg Lukács, between Greek philosophy and modern rationalism’ (Postone 1993: 156, 177–179). For his part, Lukács claimed that though Greek thought ‘had one foot in the world of reification ... the other remained in a “natural” society’ (Lukács 1971: 111). Lukács claim is, as Postone points out, of the first importance to modern theory because it illuminates both the *sui generis* nature of modern thought as a reflection of the *sui generis* nature of modern social relations and practice, and the continuity between this kind of thought and earlier approach classically realized in Greek philosophy.

Anselm Jappe has similarly argued that despite the undoubted strengths of Sohn-Rethel’s approach to the relationship between being and consciousness, his analysis of commodity production is limited by his failure to pierce beneath the level of circulation to explore the links between consciousness and production proper. According to Jappe, the key weakness with Sohn-Rethel’s argument stems from his rejection of Marx’s concept of abstract labor and his distinction between this and concrete labor. One consequence of this difference with Marx is that whereas Marx conceptualized capitalism as an alienated system of abstract labor, Sohn-Rethel effectively transposed capitalist social relations back into antiquity.

Sohn-Rethel is right in saying that abstraction is a social phenomenon and does not originate in man’s relation to nature as such. But nothing justifies his conclusion that social abstraction exists only, or even mainly, as the result of exchange. Such a statement presupposes that production is a non-social sphere. In this respect, Sohn-Rethel remains firmly within the framework of traditional Marxist approaches. (Jappe 2013: 8)

The traditional Marxism to which Jappe refers is, of course, the interpretation of Marx's theory of value that has roots in Engels's work on Vols. II and III of *Capital*.

Amongst those who have criticized Engels for his misunderstanding of value theory, Chris Arthur has also praised Sohn-Rethel for his work on abstraction. According to Arthur, Sohn-Rethel explained how abstraction in exchange 'is not a mental operation; it is a material abstraction'. And this process of material abstraction underpinned the subsequent emergence of abstract labor: 'Before the positing of labour as "abstract" there is the positing of commodities themselves as bearers of their abstract identity as values' (Arthur 2004: 80). This is an interesting argument because though it follows Sohn-Rethel's general approach to conceptualizing the relationship between practice and consciousness, it departs from his rejection of the concept of abstract labor. This is an important point because it was through his rejection of this concept as 'a fetish concept bequeathed by the Hegelian heritage' (Sohn-Rethel quoted in Jappe 2013: 7) that Sohn-Rethel effectively made explicit what was implicit for much of the twentieth century: the fundamental difference between Marx's and Engels's understanding of the labor theory of value.

Elsewhere Arthur has argued that Engels's misunderstanding of Marx's theory of value illuminates deeper methodological concerns with his thought (Arthur 1996). In 1859 Marx and Engels published outlines of their basic methodology. According to Arthur, discrepancies between the two essays illuminate deep divergences between two of them. The first of these essays was Marx's preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, followed by Engels's two-part review of this book. Both works are, for different reasons, somewhat opaque and difficult to interpret. In the first instance, as Arthur Prinz points out that Marx's preface was written with an eye to the censor and thus underplayed the active, interventionist aspect of Marxism (Prinz 1968; Blackledge 2006: 27). Secondly, Engels' review is incomplete. It was supposed to run to three parts but only the first two installments were written because the journal in which it was being serialized, *Das Volk* (effectively edited by Marx), went bankrupt before Engels had time to complete the final part of the review.

The central paragraph of Marx's preface is an infamously dense rehash of themes from *The German Ideology* (Marx 1987a: 263; Carver 1983: 72–77). This condensed summary of Marx's theory of history has been a source of debate since its first publication. If the 1859 preface has been

misinterpreted as advocating a fatalist theory of history, Marx might have mitigated this misunderstanding had he chosen to publish the much more substantial draft introduction he had written two years earlier. He elected not to do so because he believed the 1857 Introduction anticipated results that had yet to be published (Marx 1987a: 261). This somewhat unfortunate decision meant that one of Marx's more substantial mature methodological reflections was kept from Engels. First published in 1902–1903, Marx's 1857 *Introduction* is important to anyone hoping to understand his method. In it, Marx famously argued that

The economists of the seventeenth century, e.g., always begin with the living whole, with population, nation, state, several states, etc.; but they always conclude by discovering through analysis a small number of determinant, abstract, general relations such as division of labour, money, value, etc. As soon as these individual moments had been more or less firmly established and abstracted, there began the economic systems, which ascended from the simple relations, such as labour, division of labour, need, exchange value, to the level of the state, exchange between nations and the world market. The latter is obviously the scientifically correct method. The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation and conception. ... the method of rising from the abstract to the concrete is only the way in which thought appropriates the concrete, reproduces it as the concrete in the mind. (Marx 1973: 101)

The clearly dialectical but not Hegelian method suggested in this paragraph has been subject to much interrogation (Ilyenkov 2013). As it happens Engels's review of Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* was written without sight of the 1857 Introduction, and Arthur argues that it suffers by comparison (Arthur 1996: 180; Carver 1983: 96–97). In his review, Engels wrote that whereas the Germans had previously lacked a first-rate political economist, Marx had now filled this gap. What is more, his contribution to political economy superseded those of his predecessors because his approach was rooted in a new, scientific approach to the study of history: 'The materialist conception of history' (Engels 1980: 469).

Whereas Smith and Ricardo had proved themselves incapable of grasping the essence of capitalism because they could not see beyond its horizons,

Marx's *historical* materialism allowed him to view capitalism in its essence as a transitory rather than a natural form. This was the first time that the phrase 'the materialist conception of history' was used, and Carver makes much of it. He claims that this 'brief notice represents a turning point in his thought, his career and in the Marx-Engels intellectual relationship'. At this moment, according to Carver, Engels began to reduce Marx's thought to a crudely materialist caricature of the same that was subsequently picked up to become the methodological cornerstone of Soviet Marxism: 'Marx's work was transmogrified in Engels's 1859 review into the academic philosophy that the self-clarification of *The German Ideology* had triumphantly superseded' (Carver 1983: 116).

Carver's evidence for this claim is flimsy indeed. To begin with, Marx was editing the journal in which Engels's essay was published, had asked Engels for the review, and Engels had offered it with a cover note suggesting that 'if you don't like it in toto, tear it up and let me have your opinion' (Engels 1983: 478). More specifically, the phrase 'materialist conception of history' may have been new, but it certainly is not an eccentric description of either Marx's 1859 preface or the approach outlined in *The German Ideology*. Indeed, in the first version of *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels had written that 'we know only a single science, the science of history' (Marx and Engels 1976: 28; Blackledge 2019a).

Engels's aim in his review was to explicate the method underlying 'Marx's critique of political economy' (Engels 1980: 475). This was a doubly difficult task as Marx's recent re-engagement with Hegel had led him to clarify his ideas on this matter. As he famously wrote to Engels in January 1858: 'What was of great use to me as regards method of treatment was Hegel's *Logic* at which I had taken another look BY MERE ACCIDENT' (Marx 1983: 249). Marx's debt to Hegel was registered by Engels in his review of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. However, upon first reading a draft of this work he complained to Marx that Marx's abstract was 'A VERY ABSTRACT INDEED ... and I often had to search hard for the dialectical transitions, particularly since ALL ABSTRACT REASONING is now completely foreign to me' (Engels 1983: 304). Clearly Engels's task would have been easier had he had sight of the 1857 introduction, but he had not.

Arthur argues that Engels's essay points to a very different conception of dialectic to that outlined in Marx's 1857 Introduction. In his *Introduction*, Marx argued that 'It would ... be unfeasible and wrong to let the economic categories follow one another in the same sequence as

that in which they were historically decisive. Their sequence is determined, rather, by their relation to one another in modern bourgeois society, which is precisely the opposite of that which seems to be their natural order or which corresponds to historical development' (Marx 1973, 107).

Conversely, Engels suggested that 'the critique of political economy could still be arranged in two ways—historically or logically ... [But] the logical method ... is indeed nothing but the historical method, only stripped of the historical form and of interfering contingencies' (Engels 1980: 475).

Arthur comments that whereas Marx had learnt from Hegel the necessity of distinguishing 'systematic dialectic (a method of exhibiting the inner articulation of a given whole) and historical dialectic (a method of exhibiting the inner connection between stages of development of a temporal process)', Engels 'conflated the two' (Arthur 1996: 182–183). As to why Marx, as Engels's editor, had let this comment pass in 1859, Arthur suggests that it may well have been because 'he was still undecided about the relevance of his logical arrangement of the categories for historical research' (Arthur 1996: 186).

Arthur claims that Engels's conflation of the logical and historical methods opened the door to his profound misunderstanding of Marx's *Capital*. In his preface to Vol. III, Engels famously wrote that 'at the beginning of Volume I, where Marx takes simple commodity production as his historical presupposition, only later, proceeding from this basis, to come to capital ... he proceeds precisely there from the simple commodity and not from a conceptually and historically secondary form, the commodity as already modified by capitalism' (Marx 1981: 103).

Elsewhere, in his supplement to the second edition of *Capital* Vol. III, he expanded on the implications of this argument: 'the law of value applies universally ... for the entire period of simple commodity production' which dates back to at least 3500 BC (Marx 1981: 1037). This statement, as John Weeks points out, 'leaps off the page at the reader'. Weeks rightly argues that, if true, the implications of Engels's claim are profoundly destructive to Marx's critique of political economy: 'To argue that the law of value ruled for five to seven thousand years ... is to argue that exchange can occur amongst independent, self-employed producers without generating capitalism' (Weeks 1981: 45).

Engels's claim amounts to a variant of Proudhon's ideas that Marx had so devastatingly criticized in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, and that he had himself criticized so ably in his essay *The Housing Question*. To assume the

truth of Engels's argument consequently strikes at the core of both his and much more substantially Marx's critique of Proudhon's reformist 'critique of political economy from the standpoint of political economy'. The law of value is not 3500 years old but operates in a system of generalized commodity production where labor has been separated from the means of production such that the ability to work becomes commodified as labor power. Marx detailed the emergence of this system in his famous discussion of the primitive accumulation of capital (Marx 1976: 873–876). The fact that this argument and Marx's earlier critique of Proudhon built on insights from Engels's *Umrisse* makes Engels's misunderstanding of value theory all the more unfortunate. In fact, his error implicitly opened the door to the sort of utopian and reformist politics he had explicitly fought against since the 1840s.

Simply put, in his preface and supplement to Vol. III of *Capital*, Engels evidenced that he had 'completely misconstrued Marx's value theory'; and he did so because he confused 'concrete and abstract labour' (Weeks 1981: 8, 55). In fact, in his introduction to Marx's original draft of Vol. III, Fred Moseley has lamented that the questions Engels asked of Marx about this volume evidence that 'when Engels started this very difficult project, he appears to have had very little knowledge and overall understanding of Marx's Book III' (Moseley 2016: 3). It is difficult to overstate the importance of Engels's misunderstanding of the theoretical architecture of *Capital*. The distinction between the concepts of abstract and concrete labor sits at the core of Marx's mature critique of political economy—indeed, he wrote to Engels that it was one of the 'the best points in my book' (Marx 1987b: 407). This distinction is important because it is through the concept of abstract labor that Marx overcomes fundamental problems with the variants of the labor theory of value as conceived by Adam Smith and David Ricardo (Rubin 1979: 248–255). Whereas neither Smith nor Ricardo fully grasped how distinct types of concrete labor could be compared, Marx solved this problem through the argument that labor has a dual character. It is both 'concrete labour'—the specific act of working to produce useful things—and 'abstract labour'—the process of value creation through the equalization of concrete acts of labor under the discipline of competition (Saad-Filho 2002: 26–29; Rubin 1973: 131–158; Colletti 1972: 82–92). Whereas Smith's and Ricardo's studies in political economy ultimately failed in their attempts to conceptualize capitalism because they were unable to extricate their accounts of the labor theory of value from the superficial materiality of labor as a multiplicity of distinct

concrete acts, Marx's concept of abstract labor allowed him to abstract from these concrete forms to grasp the more general value form. It was through the concept of abstract labor that Marx realized the scientific task of illuminating the essence of capitalism as a uniquely dynamic mode of production with its own characteristic forms of social conflict (Meikle 1985: 63–70; Blackledge 2012: 33–36).

Unfortunately, Engels's misunderstanding of value theory framed the bulk of twentieth-century studies of the subject. One consequence of this theoretical failure was that the conception of the labor theory of value held by Marx's epigones became susceptible to the criticisms that had proved to be so devastating to Ricardo's and Smith's variants of the theory. This challenge to Marx is exactly what happened in the 1970s and 1980s when the neo-Ricardians mounted an overwhelming critique of the labor theory of value; or at least a critique that overwhelmed the variant of value theory that had roots in Engels's misunderstanding of Marx (Steedman 1977). Amongst the many malign consequences of this critique, capitalism disappeared as a specific object of enquiry—the neo-Ricardians proved themselves unable to distinguish between the exploitation of modern proletarians and the exploitation of other producers in pre-capitalist societies (Rowthorn 1980: 14–47). Furthermore, the neo-Ricardians reduced exploitation to a moral concept—not getting the rate for the job—with a simple reformist solution: a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. Consequently, by rejecting value theory a generation of left-wing intellectuals rejected Marxist revolutionary politics for a moralistic and reformist alternative (Fine and Harris 1979: 30; Blackledge 2004: 67, 2010).

But if the defense of a scientific analysis of capitalism required that Marxists drop Engels's version of value theory, it is not at all clear that Arthur is right to suggest that Engels's errors on this score were caused by his conflation of the logical and historical methods in his conception of the dialectic. Bertell Ollman has suggested that there is no clear-cut division between historical and logical methods: 'by uncovering the connections between ... value, labour, capital and interest ... and other social factors Marx is also displaying a moment in their unfolding historical relations' (Ollman 2003: 131). Similarly, Ben Fine, Costas Lapavistas, and Dimitris Milonakis insist that the link between systematic and historical dialectic should be maintained because other wise systematic dialectic risks becoming unhinged from the material world in a way that 'grants unlimited degrees of freedom to the theorist when it comes to explaining particular historical phenomena' (Fine et al. 2000: 136). Meanwhile Alfredo Saad-

Filho agrees that ‘purely conceptual reasoning is limited because it is impossible to explain why relations that hold in the analyst’s head must also hold in the real world ... The concrete can be analyzed theoretically only if historical analysis belongs within the method of exposition’ (Saad-Filho 2002: 19–20; Ilyenkov 2013: 202–208).

These arguments suggest that the fundamental problem with Engels’s comments on simple commodity production relate not to his understanding of dialectics generally but to the narrower matter of his misunderstanding of value theory. This weakness is important because it implies that Marx was wrong to believe, first, that value theory was the key to understanding modern capitalism as a historically specific mode of production and, second, that there was an intrinsic link between his critique of political economy and revolutionary politics (Colletti 1972: 91; Weeks 1981: 45). Nonetheless, because the error in respect of value theory contradicted the general trajectory of his politics, to correct it is a relatively simple matter within the theoretical framework he outlined most comprehensively in *Anti-Dühring* (Blackledge 2017, 2018). It is thus a much less destructive weakness than the claim that Engels’s understanding of dialectics and method was fundamentally flawed.

Engels’s interlocutors have tended to agree with Arthur that the negative aspects of his contribution to value theory reflect broader weaknesses with his version of the dialectical method. But whereas Arthur is careful to distance himself from the more extreme claims of what he calls the ‘anti-Engels faction’—for instance, he does not allow his awareness of the errors marring Engels’s presentation of *Capital* to detract from an appreciation of the fundamental importance of his role in the monumental task of preparing Vols. II and III published in the decade after Marx’s death (Arthur 1996: 175–179; Moseley 2016: 4)—commentary on Engels does tend to suffer from what he calls ‘Engels phobia’ (Arthur 1996: 175–176).

This is an unfortunate situation because, though Engels may have misunderstood the value form, his understanding of the dialectical method is much less problematic. In his preface to the third volume of *Capital*, he wrote that where ‘things and their mutual relations are conceived not as fixed but rather as changing, their mental images too, i.e. concepts, are also subject to change and reformulation’ (Marx 1981: 103; Saad-Filho 2002: 14). Dill Hunley notes that while ‘Engels did not speak of ‘rising from the abstract to the concrete’ ... a careful reading of his comments shows [he] expressed views very close to those of Marx without using his precise wording’ (Hunley 1991: 92). In fact, as Bertell Ollman insists,

Marx and Engels were in broad agreement on methodological issues (Ollman 1976: 52, 2003: 147).

Amongst the methodological insights of Marx and Engels's work was a stress on the dialectical interrelationship between change and continuity in history. Despite the weaknesses of his arguments, Sohn-Rethel's work points to the power of this insight. He may have misconstrued the nature of the shift to a monetary economy in Iron Age Greece, but he was not wrong that this was an important turning point in history. For it was the moment that opened the door to abstract thought while setting in train a process that culminated in the emergence of capitalism. Capitalism may have a unique dynamic that emerged as a qualitative break with pre-capitalist social formations, but this qualitative break was premised upon prior quantitative changes in the social formations that preceded it. And just as the shift to abstract thinking in the Iron Age marked, as Thomson suggests, a qualitative change that was nevertheless built upon earlier quantitative developments in the Bronze Age, so what Lukács calls fully reified forms of modern thought have their roots in, despite involving a break with, the partial forms of reification and abstraction known to the Greeks. Engels, Thomson, and Sohn-Rethel may have ultimately misunderstood value theory and the nature of capitalism, but without them our historical self-awareness would be greatly diminished.

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Marx: The Method of Political Economy as an Ontological Critique

Mario Duayer

INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with the so-called question of the method in Marx. The debate around the methodological issues in the Marxist tradition are mainly based on the famous text entitled ‘The Method in Political Economy’, which appears in the introduction of the *Grundrisse* (Marx 2011a). Though unfinished and not published by the author, it constitutes the only work in which Marx deals explicitly with the issues relative to the method. It is then natural that it is the obligatory reference for the theoretical arguments on the Marxist method.

As the chapter consists in a critical contribution *inside* the Marxist tradition, it is worth warning, and not just for convention, that other dimensions of the work of the authors here mentioned are not being questioned: the critical commentaries concentrate only in their interpretations of the ‘Method...’. It is even important to recognize the value of these works in the divulgation of the Marxist text, as well as being of importance to enlarge and enrich important aspects which surge from it.

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The critique realized in the chapter seeks to show, in the first place, that it is a serious misunderstanding to suggest that Marx settles the general lines of *his* method in this writing; second, and even more relevant, that, with Lukács¹ as an exception, the most influential interpretations cannot account for the ontological orientation of the Marxist text, precisely the fundamental dimension of his critique. With this purpose, the chapter starts transcribing the passages of the work of Marx of interest for our discussion. Then, it examines what some authors have elaborated to illustrate the most characteristic elements of what could be considered the standard interpretation. Finally, it suggests that Marx describes the procedures of science in general and not of his method, reason why it can be inferred that the resolution of the matter is not properly of a *method*, either *gnoseological* or *epistemological*, but *ontological*.

MARX'S METHOD?

The critique cannot be elaborated without quoting the large initial passage of 'The Method of Political Economy', which synthesizes the ideas of Marx (2011a). To facilitate the exposition, it was decided to use italics for the most commented passages by the literature on the matter:

When we consider a given country politico-economically, we begin with its population, its distribution among classes, town, country, the coast, the different branches of production, export and import, annual production and consumption, commodity prices etc. *It seems to be correct to begin with the real and the concrete, with the real precondition, thus to begin, in economics, with e.g. the population, which is the foundation and the subject of the entire social act of production.* However, on closer examination this proves false. *The population is an abstraction if I leave out, for example, the classes of which it is composed.* These classes in turn are an *empty phrase* if I am not familiar with the *elements on which they rest.* E.g. wage labour, capital, etc. These latter in turn *presuppose* exchange, division of labour, prices, etc. For example, *capital is nothing without wage labour, without value, money, price* etc. Thus, if *I were to begin with the population*, this would be a *chaotic conception* [Vorstellung] of the whole, and I would then, *by means of further determination*, move analytically towards *ever more simple concepts* [Begriff], from the *imagined concrete* towards *ever thinner abstractions* until I had arrived at the *simplest determinations.* *From there the journey would have to be retraced* until I had *finally* arrived at the *population again*, but this time not as the *chaotic conception* of a whole, but as a *rich totality of many*

determinations and relations. The former is the path historically followed by economics at the time of its origins. The economists of the seventeenth century, e.g., always begin with the living whole, with population, nation, state, several states, etc.; but they always conclude by discovering through analysis a small number of determinant, abstract, general relations such as division of labour, money, value, etc. As soon as these individual moments had been more or less firmly established and abstracted, there began the economic systems, which ascended from the simple relations, such as labour, division of labour, need, exchange value, to the level of the state, exchange between nations and the world market. The latter is obviously the scientifically correct method. The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation [Anschauung] and conception. Along the first path the full conception was evaporated to yield an abstract determination; along the second, the abstract determinations lead towards a reproduction of the concrete by way of thought. (Marx 2011a: 54. Italics added)

As we shall see now, in general, those two paragraphs have been used to affirm or suggest that Marx considers *his own* the second method—the retracing phase—the scientifically correct method. Callinicos, for example, after quoting the passage, concludes that ‘This, then, is Marx’s method of analysis. (...) So we move first from concrete to abstract, breaking down the concrete into its “simplest determinations”, and then from abstract to concrete, using these to reconstruct the whole. We shall see this method at work when Marx analyses capitalist society in *Capital*’ (Callinicos 2004: 74).

Carchedi seems to support an identical interpretation. Quoting Marx’s passage in which he suggests that it is necessary that ‘From there the journey would have to be retraced until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations’, he highlights that ‘This is what Marx calls the “concrete in thought”. The “retracing” phase is the dialectical deduction, the unfolding (reconstruction in thought) of more-and-more concrete, detailed, and articulated notions of reality derived from their potential state. Each step in the unfolding is a (temporary) conclusion, but also the premise for the following step in the chain of deductions’ (Carchedi 2011: 46).

The author describes the process of knowledge explained by Marx in terms of dialectical induction and deduction, different from their equiva-

lents in formal logics. We are not trying to discuss, here, Carchedi's propositions, but if it is said that 'Marx's starting point of induction is indeed empirical reality'; it is clear that for him, Marx, in fact, is talking about *his own* method.

Foley certainly shares a similar interpretation when he affirms that 'This double motion is pervasive in Marx's writing'. He thinks that *Capital* can be seen as 'a movement to reconstruct in thought the whole complex of capitalist social relations beginning from the simplest abstractions - commodity, value, and money - and eventually arriving at the most complex and distorted forms, for example, the stock market and crisis' (Foley 1986: 4).

Basu, in a working paper for the Economics Department of the University of Massachusetts (Amherst), famous for its Marxist tradition, is convinced that, from the *Grundrisse* till the redaction of *Capital*, Marx puts into practice *his* understanding of 'the correct method of political economy', which had been detailed in the 'Introduction'. According to the author, Marx explains that "ascending from the abstract to the concrete" is the only scientific way to understand a concrete reality like a capitalist society' (Basu 2017: 6). Such a movement ends 'With a structured synthesis of determinations, which is how Marx visualized the reproduction in thought of the concrete reality he was studying' (Basu 2017: 6).

In his analysis of 'The Method of Political Economy', Netto observes that 'the method in Marx' is not the product of a sudden and fantastic *insight*, but of a long process of investigation. In his opinion, in the 'Introduction', after 15 years of studies, 'the central elements' of Marx's method are 'precisely' formulated. According to the author, the few pages of the work present synthetically 'the bases of the method which made viable the analysis in *Das Kapital* and the foundation of Marx's social theory' (Netto 2011: 19).

The author remembers that, in the process of knowledge, of theoretical production and of theoretical appropriation of the object suggested by Marx 'it starts "with the real and with the concrete", which appear as given; through the analysis, elements are abstracted and, progressively, with its advance, some concepts and abstractions are reached which refer to the simplest determinations' (Originally highlighted, Netto 2011: 42).

And he adds, based on the Marxist text, that this was the method adopted by economics in its origins. However, in the sequence of his analysis, Netto dismisses a crucial element of Marx's argument. In fact, according to him, Marx claims that 'the analytical procedure was a necessary element for the emergence of the political economy', and, nonetheless, it

is not sufficient to ‘ideally reproduce (theoretically) the “real” and the “concrete”’. Supplied with the simplest determinations, as Marx recommends, it would be necessary to make a retracted journey and reach the population not as a chaotic representation of the totality, but as ‘rich totality of determinations and diverse relations’. This is the ‘retracted journey’, he concludes, the one that Marx characterizes as ‘the adequate method for a theoretical production’. And he closes with Marx’s statement: ‘The last method is clearly the scientifically exact method’ (Netto 2011: 43).

It is not possible to affirm that, according to Netto, Marx refers to *his* method when he mentions the retracted journey as the scientifically correct method. Nevertheless, the way in which he presents and comments on the passages of the Marxist text undoubtedly lead the reader to that conclusion. In fact, even though he warns the reader that ‘we do not offer, in the name of Marx, a set of rules to orient the investigation’ (Netto 2011: 52–52), his analysis finishes as follows:

The theoretical knowledge is, (...) according to Marx, the knowledge of the concrete, which constitutes reality, but it is not directly offered to thought: it must be reproduced by it and only ‘the retraced journey’ allows this reproduction. We already pointed out that, (...) the concrete to which thought is capable to arrive through the method that Marx considers as ‘scientifically correct’ (the ‘concrete in thought’) is a product of thought which realizes a ‘retraced journey’. Marx does not hesitate in qualifying this method as the one which consists in ‘rising from the abstract to the concrete’, it is ‘the only way’ by which ‘thought appropriates the concrete’. (Netto 2011: 44–45)

The erroneous conclusion that is possible to infer from his analysis comes, according to us, of the omission of the passage, essential in the commented text, in which Marx affirms that ‘the *economic systems* ascended from the simple relations, such as labour, division of labour, need, exchange value, to the level of the state, exchange between nations and the world market’. (Marx 2011a: 54. Emphasis added.) Of course, by economic systems, Marx means economic theories, which, therefore, made the ‘retracted journey’. Now, if according to him the economic science made the ‘retracted journey’, Marx could not consider exclusively *his* this ‘scientifically correct method’.

Quartim de Moraes² also analyzes in detail ‘The Method of Political Economy’ and, contrary to the authors previously studied, he does not seem to consider that Marx explains there what would be *his* method.

However, in spite of the interesting contributions he offers to clarify Marx's positions, I consider that his analysis is inconclusive.

His explanation starts highlighting the apparently paradoxical character of Marx's initial statement that the correct starting point is the real and the concrete, the effective presupposition, to immediately suggest that, in a more rigorous way, this proves to be false. Instead of paradoxical, I would say that such an ambiguity can be seen as a rhetorical device to call the reader's attention, taking advantage of the perplexity aroused by the ambiguity. Quartim understands it in a different way, noticing, of course, that that is not what Marx wishes to suggest. He reasserts, with Marx, that in spite of the fact that the population is 'the the foundation and the subject of the entire social act of production', it is an abstraction if its determinations are ignored and, thence, if we only reach a 'chaotic conception of the whole'. In relation with the fact that, in Marx's text, '*representation* comes associated to chaos ... and is assimilated in an abstraction', Quartim emphasizes something important in understanding Marx's argument, and which is not generally highlighted:

Every common noun is a universal, the necessarily abstract result of a generalization operated in the collective practice. Transposed from colloquial language into theoretical discourse, the noun usually keeps its basic meaning. Thus, both in political economy as in biology, by population we understand a collectivity composed of individuals living in a specific area. It is evident that in this general level, the notion does not indicate some knowledge, but an object to be known, which is, however, susceptible of being progressively determined with more precision. (Quartim de Moraes 2017: 44)

In truth, when he talks about 'chaotic conception of the whole', Marx refers to the most immediate form of considering a country from the political-economic point of view, or rather, the country with 'its population, its distribution among classes, town, country, the coast, the different branches of production, export and import, annual production and consumption, commodity prices etc.'. Consequently, contrary from what is deduced from Quartim's text, in this case the population is not merely an abstract universal as any other common noun, once it is specified by those determinations. Besides, it is important to stress that, in spite of being abstract, it is still a type of knowledge, a type of representation, however chaotic it may be, which consists of some—pre-scientific, pre-theoretical—intelligibility of the world, presupposition of the social practice of the sub-

jects. Quartim seems to paradoxically agree with this because when he does a critique of Althusser's interpretation of the Marxian text—which is not necessary to reproduce here entirely—he claims:

(Althusser) should also explain that before being the raw material of theoretical production, the intuitions and representations constitute the lexical heritage of each language, and it results from the social practice. (...) They crystallize the social thought built up in each historical moment and they provide knowledge with the heritage of ideas which constitute the materials on which the theoretical work operates. (Quartim de Moraes 2015: 79/80)

In spite of being clarifying, I believe this passage deserves rectification, since, such as Marx suggests on the passage in question, as well as in other moments,³ it appears more adequate to invert Quartim's proposition and affirm that the intuitions and representations constitute the heritage of figurations of the world, the necessary requirement for social practice, and, on that condition, they are actually the material of which theories are made. Such an inversion is not only conceptually and chronologically more adequate, since the lexical heritage does not exist separately and 'before' the conceptual apprehension of reality,⁴ but it also explicitly states something obvious, namely that social reality, being the product of the intentional practice of the subjects, has to be always imagined, conceived by the subjects in some way.

In an alternative formulation of the same idea, from the truism that any human activity has as necessary presupposition the existence of social structures, Bhaskar concludes that society provides means, rules and resources for everything we do. He means that, society with its structures is a necessary condition for any teleological activity. From this, it can be inferred that we do not create society, but it always preexists our actions. What we do with our practice is to reproduce and/or transform the—material and spiritual—social structures, which are the condition for our daily practice. In the words of the author: '(the) social world is reproduced and transformed in daily life'. And if the intentional practice acts on the preexisting structures, reproducing or transforming them, it follows that some kind of knowledge of the structures is a condition for the practice (Bhaskar 1989: 3–4). Said another way, it can be concluded that our apprehensions of reality are not a result of what we 'capture with sensorial perception, but the result of the theories [and/or representations—MD] in terms of which our apprehension of things is organized' (Bhaskar 1989: 60–61).

In that sense, it can be asserted that Marx refers, when saying that it always starts in population, not to a mere noun, but to a representation of the population which, lacking an economic science, was the necessary condition for the agents in the real economic life. There is no doubt that is what Marx has in mind when he notices that

... if I were to begin with the population, this would be a chaotic conception [*Vorstellung*] of the whole, and I would then, by means of further determination, move analytically towards ever more simple concepts [*Begriff*], from the imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstractions until I had arrived at the simplest determinations...

The former is the path historically followed by economics at the time of its origins. The economists of the seventeenth century, e.g., always begin with the living whole, with population, nation, state, several states, etc., but they always conclude by discovering through analysis a small number of determinant, abstract, general relations such as division of labour, money, value, etc. (Marx 2011a: 54)

The economic science, therefore, at its beginning stage, starts with the representation of population of the real agents of social production. Quartim is more emphatic when he highlights that for the economists of the seventeenth century ‘there was no other way of moving on in the economic analysis’, so that Marx was wrong to qualify that way as false. (Quartim de Moraes 2017: 45). Fact that Marx, according to him, admits tacitly in the sequence of his arguments:

As soon as these individual moments had been more or less firmly established and abstracted, there began the economic systems, which ascended from the simple relations, such as labour, division of labour, need, exchange value, to the level of the state, exchange between nations and the world market. The latter is obviously the scientifically correct method. The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation [*Anschauung*] and conception. Along the first path the full conception was evaporated to yield an abstract determination; along the second, the abstract determinations lead towards a reproduction of the concrete by way of thought. (Marx 2011a: 54)

Interpreted in a correct manner, Marx's argument can be described as follows: the authors involved in the genesis of the economic science did not have where to commence but in the common representation(s) of the real agents of the social production. Since the social reality is always represented,⁵ they started from those representations so as to discover, by means of analysis, 'a small number of determinant, abstract, general relations such as division of labour, money, value, etc.'. Knowledge acquired in such way, as we may infer from Marx's text, returns to practice and makes it more efficient because, now, the subjects act knowing some structures and the way they function.

In connection with the double journey—the round trip—of the Marxian text, Quartim contributes to dissolve the pseudo-problem with a simple and direct formulation, when he highlights the difficulties of understanding Marx's proposal. He says that 'It seems obvious that far from opposing to the first path, the second one presupposes it. The first departs from the representations of the common language to dissolve the representations in abstract determinations. The latter works with them to forge the analytical tools which permit to reproduce the "concrete in thought"' (Quartim de Moraes 2017: 45).

That is precisely one of the central points of the position defended in this chapter. But not for the same reasons presented by Quartim, who attributes to Marx the mistake of presenting as two paths what actually were three different moments of a sole process—of the beginning of the economic theory—an error, which may have caused the paradoxical character of the introduction. According to the author, Marx does not ease the understanding of his argument since he qualifies as false the first path. In his opinion: 'Marx artificially segments the history of the formation of the economic theory, presenting as two paths (one which ends, the other which starts in the 'abstract determinations') the three moments of a sole process' (Quartim de Moraes 2017: 45).

By virtue of this interpretation, Quartim risks a hypothesis to explain what he considers 'the paradox of the two paths'. According to him, Marx does not attribute to the first economists the mistake of starting at the first path, but to the analyses which start

... from the obscure representation of a living totality in the *nineteenth century*, when the simple elements, identified by analysis, had already allowed the economic systems to ascend to the level of the state... The great theoretical mission which should have been carried out, in the second half of the nineteenth century, was the critique of the political economy as it had been elaborated by Adam Smith in the last third of the eighteenth century and by David Ricardo and others in the first decades of the nineteenth century. (Quartim de Moraes 2017: 45)

In truth, if there is something that can be qualified as artificial, it is, doubtlessly, the hypothesis offered by Quartim, which cannot find any kind of direct or indirect support in the original. Contrary to what he proposes, the problem, according to Marx, does not consist in the fact that the first economists made a mistake for not making the ‘retracted journey’, for not totalizing by means of discovered relations and determinations. In truth, the problem is that they did not abandon the representation of totality from which they departed and, therefore, they maintained the notions on the immediately given reality, now enriched by the discovered determinations, and this is the reason for which they were dispensed of totalizing.

In short, we sought to illustrate in this section a very widespread interpretation according to which the ‘retracted journey’ is the hallmark of the method of Marx. The only exception is Quartim’s contribution, though it is incomplete. In the next section, we show that the misunderstanding of those analyses has its origin in the fact that they are confined to the so-called problem of the ‘method’, while Marx’s analysis evidently shows that the problem is of an ontological character, as we try to demonstrate in the following section.

ONTOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

The first matter to be observed for an adequate interpretation of Marx’s thought is his categorical declaration on the instauration of the economic systems. As we saw above he stated that: ‘As soon as these individual moments had been more or less firmly established and abstracted, there began the economic systems, which ascended from the simple relations, such as labour, division of labour, need, exchange value, to the level of the state, exchange between nations and the world market. The latter is obviously the scientifically correct method’ (Marx 2011a: 54. Emphasis added).

Now, if Marx considered that the economic science proceeded in such a way, there is no doubt that for him, the economic science employs the scientifically correct method. Therefore, there is no basis for declaring that the second method, the retracted journey, is *his* method.

In fact, Marx could not even have the ambition of being the holder of the copyright of the scientifically correct method, since the retracted journey is nothing more than the synthesis process, that is, the process of totalizing, the ultimate objective of the analysis process of any science. 'The descending path, according to Marx, is the indispensable premise of the ascending path. I think that what is meant by the latter being the scientifically (Wissenschaftlich) correct method is that political economy as a science (Wissenschaft) is first established by the various pieces of economic knowledge (Wissen) forming a system' (Kuruma 1969).

What use would science find in interrupting the process in its analytical moment and, thus, remaining with a group of inarticulate abstract concepts? And, consequently, being unable to produce any kind of knowledge about the studied reality, apart from the phenomonic results. In sum, the fundamental meaning of Marx's explanation can be expressed as follows: every science totalizes, it forms a figure of the reality in question, a reproduction of the concrete, as a result of the synthesis process. It does the retracted journey with the elements obtained in the analysis process. Hence every science sets up a new ontology or offers scientific arguments for the ordinary ontology(ies). As a consequence, it is possible to assure that for him, the problem of science is not totalizing but the way in which it does it, and the categories from which it departs:⁶

Man's reflections on the forms of social life, and consequently, also, his scientific analysis of those forms, take a course directly opposite to that of their actual historical development. He begins, post festum, with the results of the process of development ready to hand before him. The characters that stamp products as commodities, and whose establishment is a necessary preliminary to the circulation of commodities, have already acquired the stability of natural, self-understood forms of social life, before man seeks to decipher, not their historical character, for in his eyes they are immutable, but their meaning. Consequently, it was the analysis of the prices of commodities that alone led to the determination of the magnitude of value, and it was the common expression of all commodities in money that alone led to the establishment of their characters as values. It is, however, just this ultimate money form of the world of commodities that actually conceals,

instead of disclosing, the social character of private labour, and the social relations between the individual producers.

The categories of bourgeois economy consist of such like forms. They are forms of thought expressing with social validity the conditions and relations of a definite, historically determined mode of production, viz., the production of commodities. (Marx 2011b: 210–211)

The bourgeois political economy, argues Marx, is the socially valid form of the thought, objective for those productive relations, whose content he tries to investigate. What he means is that it consists in a totalization, in a figuration, in a scientific ontology of the capitalist society. It departs from the representation, as all of them, takes distance and differentiates from it, but, in the process, it hypostatizes that form of life, and, in consequence, it is a-historical. But certainly, it investigates its structure and its dynamics—in a logical time, without history, that is, without substantial changes.⁷ It departs from the finished totality, fully developed, ignores its historical character; it proceeds analytically and produces a richly articulated synthesis, without history.

Marx makes a completely different analysis with what he calls the vulgar economy, precursor of the neoclassicism. In chapter 48 from the 3rd volume of *Capital*, entitled ‘The Trinity Formula’, he analyzes the term as follows:

Vulgar economy actually does no more than interpret, systematize and defend in doctrinaire fashion the conceptions of the agents of bourgeois production who are entrapped in bourgeois production relations. It should not astonish us, then, that vulgar economy feels particularly at home in the estranged outward appearances of economic relations in which these prima facie absurd and perfect contradictions appear and that these relations seem the more self-evident the more their internal relationships are concealed from it, although they are understandable to the popular mind. But all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided. Thus, vulgar economy has not the slightest suspicion that the trinity which it takes as its point of departure, namely, land—rent, capital—interest, labour—wages or the price of labour, are prima facie three impossible combinations. (Marx 2017: 1041)

It is therefore just as natural that vulgar economy, which is no more than a didactic, more or less dogmatic, translation of everyday conceptions of the actual agents of production, and which arranges them in a certain rational

order, should see precisely in this trinity, which is devoid of all inner connection, the natural and indubitable lofty basis for its shallow pompousness. (Marx 2017: 1056–1057)

Here, Marx emphasises that the vulgar economy departs from the representation of the captive agents of the capitalist economy relations, and, instead of turning progressively different from it, it does completely the opposite: it keeps the ontology (figuration/totalization) immediately generated and needed for those relations, and it systematizes them by means of a scientific apparatus and, this done, it goes back to the agents as a form of more efficient thought in the immediate practice.⁸ This is done with the seal of science.

As it was indicated in this chapter, I tried to demonstrate, first, that the usual interpretations of ‘The Method of Political Economy’ are directly contrary to Marx’s text. On the other hand, as the title of the section points out, it concerns *The Method of Political Economy* and not *The Method of the Critique of the Political Economy*. Secondly, it was argued every science totalizes. The vulgar economy totalizes (synthesizes); the political economy totalizes; and the critique of the political economy, that is, Marx, also totalizes. Those totalizations constitute ontologies with a social force.⁹ They offer the image to the subjects, backed by the prestige of science, by means of which they position themselves in their reciprocal relations and in their relation with the natural world.

If every science totalizes, signifies the world for the subjects, and, besides, provides a scientific apparatus to administer it, manage it, it follows that it is efficient in practice. Thus, the decisive theoretical battle between the theoretical systems can only take place at an ontological level—that is to say, ontologies in dispute, radically different ways of understanding the world. In other words, an effective critique is an ontological critique. If, as we saw in Marx, the political economy is a form of thought valid and objective for the social life under capital; if it is economic science at the service of the management of that society; if it expresses and reinforces the ontological notions spontaneously generated; if, with its prestige, it not only elevates the common ideas to the exclusive figuration of society, but it also provides the techniques to reproduce it, then the critique of the political economy, as a substantial critique, creates a radically different intelligibility of the structure and the dynamics of the society ruled by capital, in the first place by restoring its historicity and, in consequence, by opening to the human practice the possibility of its trans-

formation. It contributes, in fact, to create a new ontology in which humanity is not condemned to the infinite reproduction of the same or to being a mere spectator of history as an absolute contingency. In this sense, it overcomes the positivist, postmodern, poststructuralist and neopragmatic conceptions of history.

This article was translated by Anahí Prucca.

NOTES

1. See Lukács (2012), chapter IV, section 2, for a detailed analysis of the matter elaborated by the author.
2. Without the proper permission of the author, from now on we will only use ‘Quartim’ in the references, since the Marxist theorist is widely known in that way.
3. See below Marx’s passage on the vulgar economy from the chapter about the Trinity formula.
4. As Lukács defends (2013): ‘We have already seen how the teleological position consciously realized produces some distance in the reflection of reality and how, with this distance, the subject-object relation arises in the proper sense of the term. These two moments imply simultaneously the emergence of conceptual comprehension of the phenomena of reality and their adequate expression in language... In fact, word and concept, language and conceptual thought are linked elements of the complex called the social being, which means that they can only be understood in their true essence when related to the ontological analysis of the social being and recognizing the real functions which they exert within the complex’. (Lukács 2013: 84–85. Personal translation).
5. As Lukács observes: ‘the totality of nature can be inferred in many ways, however strict the analysis be; in the social field on the contrary, the totality is always given in an immediate way’ (Lukács 2012: 304. Personal translation). It is on this totality always immediately given where the subjects act and, consequently, they always refigure it in some way. On this matter, cf. also Duayer (2006, 2015).
6. Lukács remembers that what Marx follows from the abstract to the concrete ‘cannot start at an ordinary abstraction. [...] because, considered in isolation, any phenomenon could be taken, once it is transformed in an ‘element’ by means of the abstraction, as a starting point; only such a path would never lead to the comprehension of totality’ (Lukács 2012: 312. Personal translation).
7. On the characteristic temporalities of capitalism—abstract time and historical time—see Postone, in particular, chapter 8. According to the author, ‘the

dialectics of the two dimensions of labour in capitalism can be understood temporarily, as dialectics of two forms of time. [...] the dialectics of concrete and abstract labour results in an intrinsic dynamic characterized by a peculiar treadmill effect' (Postone 2003: 330. Personal translation.)

8. See Duayer (2006).
9. On the social force of ontology, Lukács says: '[...] independently from the degree of consciousness, all the ontological representations of men are widely influenced by society, no matter whether the dominant component is daily life, religious faith, etc. These representations fulfill an influential role in the social praxis of men and they are frequently condensed in a social power...' (Lukács 2013: 95. Personal translation).

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Marx, Berkeley and Bad Abstractions

Patrick Murray

Karl Marx and Bishop George Berkeley may seem like strange bedfellows, given Marx's reference to Berkeley as 'the advocate of mystical idealism in English philosophy' (Marx 1970a: 78).¹ However, both Marx and Berkeley were educated in philosophy; both took an interest in the new science of political economy and each brought his philosophy to bear on political economy.² Each combines phenomenological inquiry with identifying how abstraction can go wrong, creating bad abstractions. Marx goes beyond Berkeley, with the phenomenological breakthrough of historical materialism and by introducing, with his theory of value, the idea of social practices of real abstraction—practices integral to the circulation of capital—that result in capitalist society being ruled by bad abstractions of its own making.

A second historical through line runs from Berkeley through Samuel Bailey (1791–1870) to Marx.³ Berkeley, like Bailey, whose thinking he influenced, offers a critique of intrinsic value as a bad abstraction. Unlike Marx, who sees intrinsic value—which makes fetishes of commodities, money and capital—to be an unavoidable consequence of the social practices of real abstraction involved in capital's circuits, Berkeley and Bailey see intrinsic value as a theoretical gaffe. Marx quotes Bailey as saying that

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Ricardians speak of ‘value as a sort of general and independent property’ (Marx 1988: 101). Intrinsic value is an abstract idea to be seen through and set aside. Marx recognizes that value is the product of social practices of abstraction, but this theoretical insight will not do away with value.

Berkeley and Marx take the offensive against bad abstractions: matter for Berkeley and value for Marx. Berkeley battles materialism, which he sees leading to atheism and a ‘forlorn skepticism’ of our own making: ‘we have first raised a dust and then complain we cannot see’ (Berkeley 1957: 6). Berkeley attacks abstract ideas (which I will count as bad abstractions) and argues that matter, as conceived by early modern philosophers such as Descartes and Locke, is an abstract idea. Neither an idealist in Berkeley’s sense nor a materialist of the sort that Berkeley criticized, Marx criticizes bad abstractions as he encounters them in philosophy and political economy. With his historical materialist investigation of capitalist society, however, Marx opens new territory. He extends the critique of bad abstractions to the practical abstractions through which value becomes the peculiar social form of wealth in capitalist society. Value is not an abstract idea in Berkeley’s sense, for it attains a supersensible social objectivity in capitalist society; it cannot simply be debunked. Value is a bad abstraction because it is indifferent to the features that make goods useful. Marx describes the movement of industrial capital as ‘abstraction in action’, continuing, ‘here value passes through different forms, different movements in which it is both preserved and increases, is valorized’ (Marx 1978: 185). As capital, the bad abstraction value, that ‘phantom-like objectivity’, becomes ‘an automatic subject’ (Marx 1976: 128, 255). The circuit of industrial capital produces new useful things in the form of commodities which are sold at a profit, valorizing the original value and providing the money capital with which the means to a new and expanded production cycle can be purchased. When Marx writes of the capitalist mode of production that ‘individuals are ruled by *abstractions*’, he means bad abstractions (Marx 1973: 164). The consequences of capital’s rule by abstractions include alienation, fetishism, domination and exploitation.⁴

BERKELEY’S PHENOMENOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF MATTER AS AN ABSTRACT IDEA

Berkeley Affirms General Words and Ideas But Not Abstract Ideas

In the Introduction to the *Principles of Human Knowledge*, Berkeley identifies what he believes is the most persistent problem plaguing philosophy, namely, ‘the opinion that the mind has a power of framing *abstract ideas*

or notions of things' (Berkeley 1957: 7). He distinguishes among (1) abstract ideas of a quality or mode, for example the yellow of a lemon; (2) abstract ideas of kinds of qualities or modes, for example, color and (3) abstract ideas of kinds of 'compounded beings', such as triangle, pear, animal or human being. Thinking, according to Berkeley's empiricism, is perceiving, imagining or remembering. Thinking always involves sensibility; there is no pure thinking of the sort that rationalists like Descartes prize. Since abstract ideas are neither perceivable nor imaginable, Berkeley concludes that they cannot be thought. What cannot be separated in experience cannot be separated in thought.

What is distinguishable may be separable; for example, I can separate a doorknob from the rest of the door, but I cannot do likewise for the color or shape of the door. Berkeley notes that I can separate in my imagination some things that I have not perceived as separated: 'I can consider the hand, the eye, the nose, each by itself abstracted or separated from the rest of the body. But then whatever hand or eye I imagine, it must have some particular shape and color' (Berkeley 1957: 9). How do we tell when what is distinguishable is separable and when not? Phenomenological judgments, that is experience-based judgments of necessity such as 'it must have some particular shape and color', are required. The deep lesson from Berkeley, one that Marx took up, is that thinking requires both analysis and phenomenology. In Berkeley and Marx, criticism of abstract ideas relies on phenomenology: we need to draw distinctions (analysis), and we need to know when the distinguishable is separable and when not. We will turn later to the phenomenological judgments involved in Marx's historical materialism, which set up many criticisms of abstract ideas in political economy.

Berkeley rejects abstract ideas, but he allows for general ideas and the legitimate use of general words: 'I do not deny absolutely there are general ideas, but only that there are any *abstract* general ideas' (Berkeley 1957: 12). General words are not general by referring to abstract ideas (since there are none): '[But it seems that a word becomes general] by being made the sign, not of an abstract general idea, but of several particular ideas, any one of which it indifferently suggests to the mind' (Berkeley 1957: 11–12). A general idea is an idea that functions as an example: 'An idea which, considered in itself, is particular, becomes general by being made to represent or stand for all other particular ideas of the same sort' (Berkeley 1957: 12). Berkeley brings in an example from geometry. He takes the case of cutting a line in two equal parts. The geometrician 'draws,

for instance, a black line of an inch in length; this, which in itself is a particular line, is nevertheless with regard to its signification general, since as it is there used, it represents all particular lines whatsoever; for that which is demonstrated of all lines or, in other words, of a line in general' (Berkeley 1957: 12). Generality is all about how particulars are handled; a line becomes general when it serves as an example of something general. General ideas, for Berkeley, are ideas that are attended to in the right way; there are no abstract ideas.

Berkeley's Critique of Matter: It Is an Abstract Idea

To catch the modern thinking about matter to which Berkeley reacts, we can turn to the end of Meditation Two of René Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*. There he investigates the true nature of material objects and how we come to know them. Using a bit of wax as an example, Descartes draws the distinction between the secondary qualities of the wax, its color, taste, smell and sound, which are 'for us', and its primary qualities, extension, flexibility and ability to move, which belong to the wax 'in itself'. Descartes concludes with this image of the relationship between the wax's primary and secondary qualities: 'But when I distinguish the wax from its external forms, and when, just as if I had taken from it its vestments, I consider it quite naked, it is certain that although some error may still be found in my judgement, I can nevertheless not perceive it thus without a human mind' (Descartes 1970: 156).

Drawing this contrast between primary qualities as the body and the secondary qualities as its clothing shows that Descartes believes that the primary and secondary properties are separable. So, Berkeley's phenomenological claim that primary and secondary properties, for example, extension and color, are inseparable contradicts Descartes' conception of matter: 'Now, if it be certain that those original qualities are inseparably united with the other sensible qualities, and not, even in thought, capable of being abstracted from them, it plainly follows that they exist only in the mind' (Berkeley 1957: 28). If the secondary qualities exist only in the mind and the primary qualities are inseparable from them, then they too must exist only in the mind, Berkeley reasons. Matter cannot subsist outside the mind.

The target of Berkeley's immaterialism is matter understood as a super-sensible thing, extended, flexible and moveable, known only to the understanding. As an empiricist, Berkeley rejects any claim to know that is

independent of sense and imagination. So, Berkeley rejects the pure understanding, which Descartes turns to as the only faculty capable of knowing ordinary physical objects as they are in themselves, and he rejects its putative object: ‘But what is this piece of wax which cannot be understood excepting by the [understanding] or mind?’ (Berkeley 1957: 155). It is nothing but the phantom of bad abstraction.

Once he dispatches matter understood as a supersensible thing knowable only to the pure intellect or understanding, what remains for Berkeley to say about ordinary physical objects? Material things can only be compounds of sensible (ideas): ‘Thus, for example, a certain color, taste, smell, figure, and consistence having been observed to go together, are accounted one distinct thing signified by the name “apple”: other collections of ideas constitute a stone, a tree, a book, and the like sensible things’ (Berkeley 1957: 23).⁵ Berkeley goes on to argue that ‘collections of ideas’ are held together as objects only by the will of God, who causes the sequence of sensible ideas that make up our world.

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL BREAKTHROUGH OF MARX’S HISTORICAL MATERIALISM

Marx’s historical materialism, which he developed as a young man in collaboration with Friedrich Engels, represents an underappreciated watershed in human self-understanding. It opens a new discursive horizon for social theory. Historical materialism brings the topic of the *social form and purpose* of the provisioning process (mode of production) within the horizon of social theory. Historical materialism demands that ‘the determinate character of this social man is to be brought forward as the starting point, i.e. the determinate character of the existing community in which he lives, since production here, hence his *process of securing life*, already has some kind of social character’ (Marx 1975: 189). Humans are needy creatures and cannot survive without some sustainable and reproducible social provisioning process: ‘Whatever the social form of the production process, it has to be continuous; it must periodically repeat the same phases. A society can no more cease to produce than it can cease to consume. When viewed, therefore, as a connected whole, and in the constant flux of its incessant renewal, every social process of production is at the same time a process of reproduction’ (Marx 1976: 711).

The opening of this passage—‘Whatever the social form’—posits that a production process always has some reproduceable social form.

Marx’s historical materialism does not insist simply on the uncontroversial point that wealth and its continuous production are necessary to meet human needs; it calls out the social forms and purposes constitutive of specific provisioning processes. Marx and Engels write in the *German Ideology*: ‘This mode of production [*Produktionsweise*] must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* [*Lebensweise*] on their part’ (Marx and Engels 1976: 31).

Provisioning for human needs is a social process, and there are no social processes in general. Marx and Engels oppose those approaches that overlook or ignore the social form of production and wealth—treating production as if it were production-in-general. Conventional analyses overlook the historically changing ‘*modes of life*’ that belong with wealth and the processes by which it is produced. They treat production as bearing solely on the ‘reproduction of the physical existence of human beings’. This view finds in the provisioning for human life little food for thought. Marx’s complaint against such idealist ways of thinking is that they skip over the provisioning process because they fail to see that wealth and its production always have historically specific social forms, and that these forms are of great consequence (Marx 1973: 107). Materialists and economists, on the other hand, highlight material production, but likewise they miss the fact that a mode of production is ‘*a mode of life*’. As Martha Campbell characterizes Marx’s two-pronged criticism: ‘Marx’s case against idealist philosophy of law is that the goal of each particular way of life is realized through the process of satisfying needs; against economics, it is that satisfying needs is the means for realizing the goal of a particular way of life’ (Campbell 1993: 146). Where Berkeley argued that primary and secondary qualities are inseparable, Marx argues that a way of satisfying needs and a way of life are inseparable. Historical materialism’s phenomenological breakthrough is to recognize that social form and purpose reach all the way down and therefore must be ingredients in understanding any mode of production.

FROM BERKELEY, THROUGH SAMUEL BAILEY, TO MARX

A second line from Berkeley to Marx runs through Samuel Bailey. Berkeley and Bailey opposed intrinsic value, which they saw as a bad abstraction, but they were trapped in their own fetishism for lack of the historical materialist insight that wealth, labor and production always have a social form and purpose: ‘Bailey is a fetishist in that he conceives value, though not as a property of the individual object (considered in isolation), but as a *relation of objects to one another*, while it is only a representation in objects, and objective expression, of a relation between men, a social relation’ (Marx 1971: 147). Bailey’s thinking stops at appearances. Bailey’s fetishism, which reduces commodities to useful things and fails to recognize value as the social form of wealth in commercial societies, is common in economics and social theory generally.

Neither Berkeley nor Bailey recognized value as the expression of the social character of wealth produced on a capitalist basis; instead, they criticized political economists for trading in abstract ideas (intrinsic value). They did not recognize, as Marx does, that the peculiarly abstract social form and purpose of the labor that produces commodities is the source of value and of money as its necessary form of appearance. Their animus against bad abstractions was directed against the notion that value is intrinsic to commodities and money. And we can see why. The value that classical political economy claims is common and intrinsic to the products of labor must be, like Locke’s abstract idea of a triangle, which is not scalene, isosceles or equilateral but ‘all and none of these at once’, something impossibly abstract or contradictory. Value’s strange social objectivity, writes Marx, is supersensible, ‘phantom-like’: ‘The objectivity of commodities as values differs from Dame Quickly in the sense that ‘a man knows not where to have it’. Not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values; in this it is the direct opposite of the coarsely sensuous objectivity of commodities as physical objects’ (Marx 1976: 138).

Berkeley and Bailey regard talk of value as a supersensible ‘objectivity’ to be the sort of nonsense generated by bad abstraction. For Marx, the ghostly objectivity of value is purely social and real; it is generated by the real abstraction that takes place in the market, where commodities are constantly being reduced to money. Marx transposes Berkeley’s worries about the bad abstraction in thought that results in supersensible *matter* into a critique of the real abstraction involved in capital’s circulation that results in the supersensible objectivity of *value*.

Value cannot exist independently, Marx argues; it must be expressed as money, as something other than what it is.⁶ Intrinsic value is no mere abstract idea that can be seen through, then discarded, as Berkeley and Bailey do. As the product of the ‘abstraction in action’ of capital’s circulation, value is a supersensible social objectivity with observable consequences: ‘in the midst of the accidental and ever-fluctuating exchange relations between the products, the labour-time socially necessary to produce them asserts itself like a law of nature. In the same way, the law of gravity asserts itself when a person’s house collapses on top of him’ (Marx 1976: 168). Value may be a ghostly objectivity, but its effects are palpable.

Because Berkeley and Bailey failed to recognize value as the social form of wealth in capitalism, they failed to recognize that value is a social property of wealth in the commodity form that arises from the real abstractions involved in the production of wealth on a capitalist basis. In denying that value is anything intrinsic to the commodity, they, in effect, nullify the commodity’s social form. They bow to capital’s way of appearing, which Martha Campbell describes: ‘What is, for Marx, the extraordinary feature of economic activity in capitalism’ is ‘that it claims to create wealth ‘pure and simple’ and [to be] organised by this purpose’ (Campbell 2004: 86). Capital naturally creates ‘the illusion of the economic’, the illusion of an economy-in-general. In that fictive barren social landscape, bad abstractions such as the economic, utility and instrumental reason and action spring up. Even when distribution is seen to be historically variable, where production is concerned, ‘the illusion of the economic’ persists due to ‘a confusion and identification of the social production process with the simple labour process’ (Marx 1981: 1023). Berkeley and Bailey fall into ‘the illusion of the economic’. Wealth-in-general, labor-in-general and production-in-general are all fetish forms. They are all bad abstractions; that is the lesson of historical materialism. However, seeing through value as a social bad abstraction will not get rid of it. The fetish character of the commodity is intrinsic to it because a useful thing’s social form is intrinsic to it. That is why value is intrinsic to the commodity. Only a revolutionary transformation of the social form and purpose of production can eliminate value.

MARX'S CRITIQUE OF BAD ABSTRACTIONS IN PHILOSOPHY

A good deal of Marx's early work involved criticizing bad abstractions in philosophy. Graduating from a critique—adopted from Hegel—of the separation of form and content in Kant and Fichte, he regarded Hegel and Hegelianism to be the most important target. In his incomplete *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'* and in his general critique of Hegel's philosophy in the last of the *Paris Manuscripts*, Marx charges Hegel with imposing logical categories, which Marx takes to be bad abstractions, on the world and with seeing through the things of the world to the pure logical forms, which means giving priority to bad abstractions. In the *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, Marx charges Hegel with imposing his a priori categories on modern society. Hegel leads with his logical abstractions: 'However, this comprehension [*Begreifen*] does not, as Hegel thinks, consist in everywhere recognizing the determinations of the logical concept [*des logischen Begriffs*], but rather in grasping the proper logic of the proper object' (Marx 1970b: 92). In his insistence on grasping 'the proper logic of the proper subject', Marx takes a stand against bad abstractions. Hegel fails to meet his own standard with respect to (the inseparability of) form and content: 'he does not develop his thought out of what is objective [*aus dem Gegenstand*], but what is objective in accordance with ready-made thought which has its origin in the abstract sphere of logic' (Marx 1970b: 14). Marx's repeated charge that a thinker is imposing 'ready-made thinking' on the object rather than coming to understand its 'proper logic' is a protest against bad abstractions.

Marx argues that, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel reduces the 'sensuous, concrete activity of self-objectification' of humans to the bad abstraction of 'sheer activity': 'the rich, living, sensuous, concrete activity of self-objectification is therefore reduced to its mere abstraction, *absolute negativity*—an abstraction which is again fixed as such and considered as an independent activity—as sheer activity [*Tätigkeit schlechthin*]' (Marx 1964: 189). If that sounds like concrete labor being reduced to abstract labor and 'fixed' like the congealed abstract labor that is the substance of value, it should. For Marx wrote: 'Hegel's standpoint is that of modern political economy. He grasps *labor* as the *essence* of man—as man's essence in the act of proving itself: he sees only the positive, not the negative side of labor. Labor is man's *coming-to-be* for himself within *alienation*, or as *alienated* man. The only labor which Hegel knows and recognizes is *abstractly mental labor*' (Marx 1964: 177).

This is mixed praise. Hegel treats nature and humanity the way that capital does, reducing them to bad abstractions produced by abstract thought or abstract labor: ‘The *human character* of nature and of the nature created by history—man’s products—appears in the form that they are *products* of abstract mind and as such, therefore, phases of *mind—thought entities*’ (Marx 1964: 176). Marx precociously interprets Hegel through the lens of the critique of value and the real abstractions involved in the circulation of capital that had begun to emerge from his reading of political economy.⁷ Just as Marx insists that the truth of the thing-like ghostly objectivity of value is capital, which is a process, the circuit of self-valorizing value, he says here, ‘what Hegel does is to put in place of these fixed abstractions the act of abstraction which revolves in its own circle’ (Marx 1964: 191 note). Marx appears to be reading the course of consciousness as Hegel presents it in the *Phenomenology* along the lines of capital’s ‘abstraction in action’.

Returning to his reference to those ‘fixed’ abstractions, Marx pays Hegel another left-handed compliment: ‘Hegel’s positive achievement here, in his speculative logic, is that the definite concepts, the universal fixed thought-forms in their independence vis-à-vis nature and mind are a necessary result of the general estrangement of the human essence and therefore also of human thought, and Hegel has therefore brought these together and presented them as moments of the abstraction-process’ (Marx 1964: 189).

Because Hegel reduces human consciousness to sheer thought, he *necessarily* generates ‘fixed thought-forms’ set against nature and spirit. This bonds Marx’s criticism of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* with his criticisms of his *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* and the *Philosophy of Right*. Anticipating his view that value necessarily is expressed in money, Marx says of Hegel: ‘*Logic* (mind’s *coin of the realm*, the speculative or thought-value of man and nature—their essence grown totally indifferent to all real determinateness, and hence their unreal essence) is *alienated thinking*, and therefore thinking which abstracts from nature and from real man: *abstract thinking*’ (Marx 1964: 174).

So, Marx imagines Hegel’s *Logic* as a bank, a treasury of bad abstractions produced by the abstract thinker: ‘His thoughts are therefore fixed mental shapes or ghosts dwelling outside nature and man. Hegel has locked up all these fixed mental forms together in his *Logic*’ (Marx 1964: 190). In his *Encyclopedia*, Hegel puts logic before nature and spirit, so that ‘the whole of nature only repeats for him the logical abstractions in a

sensuous, external form' (Marx 1964: 91). Just as useful things in the commodity form count as 'carriers of value', Hegel treats the wealth of nature and society as mere carriers of logical (bad) abstractions.⁸

We can see this remarkable reading of Hegel through Berkeley's eyes as a tale of abstraction gone wrong. Hegel's logical categories are bad abstractions: 'As a result there are general, abstract *forms of abstraction* pertaining to every content and on that account indifferent to, and, consequently, valid for, all content—the thought-forms or logical categories torn from *real* mind and from *real* nature' (Marx 1964: 189). Marx draws the conclusion regarding these 'general, abstract *forms of abstraction*' that Berkeley drew regarding *abstract* general ideas: 'Thus, the entire *Logic* is the demonstration that abstract thought is nothing in itself' (Marx 1964: 189).

DETECTING BAD ABSTRACTIONS IN POLITICAL ECONOMY

The lesson of Marx's historical materialism is that needs, wealth, labor, production and distribution all have constitutive social forms and purposes. Provisioning processes always have inseparable social forms and purposes, which is why a mode of production is '*a way of life*' (Marx and Engels 1976: 31). This phenomenological insight sets up Marx's critique of a nest of bad abstractions associated with political economy, which operates within 'the illusion of the economic'. The illusion is to think that there is an economy-in-general and that it is the object of economic inquiry. Usually, as with Ricardo, the illusion involves conflating capitalist production with the economy-in-general: '[B]ourgeois or capitalist production ... is consequently for him [Ricardo] not a specific definite mode of production, but simply *the* mode of production' (Marx 1968: 504, note).⁹ It is as if you mixed up a pear with the Fruit, or a horse with the Animal. But the economy-in-general no more exists than does the Fruit or the Animal, which means that economics is missing its object of study. The economy-in-general is a bad abstraction and a generator of bad abstractions.

The bad abstraction of the labor process-in-general deserves special attention since some readers of *Capital* will find it in the title of its seventh chapter, 'The Labour Process and the Valorization Process'. That reading, however, twists a useful general category, the labor process, into a bad abstraction by positing an actual labor process-in-general.¹⁰ Marx insists that labor is always of some specific social kind even when he calls attention to the fact that the general concept of labor, being general, abstracts

from every social sort: ‘The fact that the production of use-values, or goods, is carried on under the control of a capitalist and on his behalf does not alter the general character of that production. We shall therefore, in the first place, have to consider the labour process independently of any specific social formation’ (Marx 1976: 283).

Marx’s general concept of the labor process abstracts, precisely because it is general, from the tools or materials required, and from the social form and purpose of the labor process. That has led to the mistaken notion that Marx’s general concept of labor abstracts from these complexities altogether. ‘Considering something independently’ is just what Hume, following Berkeley, called making a distinction of reason. To *consider* the labor process apart from social form and purpose is not to claim that it can exist as a labor process-in-general. The phenomenological breakthrough of historical materialism is to show that there can be no such thing.

Considering the labor process in abstraction from social form, Marx identifies three general features of the labor process: ‘The simple elements of the labour process are (1) purposeful activity, that is work itself, (2) the object on which that work is performed, and (3) the instruments of that work’ (Marx 1976: 284). With these general features of the labor process, Marx sets up his critique in Chapter 48 of *Capital 3*, ‘The Trinity Formula’, of the fetishizing of the three revenue forms: interest, rent and wages.¹¹ There Marx relies on two key phenomenological points: (1) the three factors of production always have a determinate social form and (2) production requires that all three factors be involved.

(1) The formulation of the Trinity Formula *produced means of production—interest, land—rent, labor—wages* presents the three factors of the labor process-in-general as mysteriously invested by nature with the social powers of yielding revenues in the forms of interest, rent and wages. In this formula, we have the consistent conflation of the general categories produced means of production, land and labor with the socially specific revenue forms interest, rent and wages (and, correlatively, with three social classes: capitalists, landowners and wage laborers). Revenues in these specific social forms: ‘appear to grow out of the roles that the earth, the produced means of production and labour play in the simple labour process, considering this labour process simply as proceeding between man and nature and ignoring any historical specificity’ (Marx 1981: 964).

This mismatch is the outcome of twisting the general abstraction, the labor process, into the bad abstraction that posits a labor process-in-general and conflates it with the capitalist valorization process.

(2) The fact that three factors of production in the production of wealth are distinguishable can lead to the fallacious reasoning of the Trinity Formula, which, taking its lead from the forms of revenue: wages, interest and rent, *isolates* the contributions of the three factors: ‘In the formula capital-interest, earth-ground-rent, labour-wages, capital, earth and labour appear respectively as sources of interest (instead of profit), ground-rent and wages as their products or fruits—one the basis, the other the result, one the cause, the other the effect—and moreover in such a way that each individual source is related to its product as something extruded from it and produced by it’ (Marx 1981: 955).

Marx expands on the image of fruit, saying of the three forms of revenue: ‘They appear as fruits of a perennial tree for annual consumption, or rather fruits of three trees’ (Marx 1981: 960). Marx’s image of three fruit trees, each producing its own fruit, recalls his earlier use of ‘*the Fruit*’ as a bad abstraction (Marx and Engels 1975: 60). The image represents general concepts that have been twisted into bad abstractions. The notion of three independent sources of revenue, the three perennial fruit trees, betrays a phenomenology of the labor process that separates distinguishable factors into three independent sources. Marx’s phenomenological point is that all three factors of production are required to produce fruit from any tree. No orchard has a ‘land trees’ row, a ‘means of production trees’ row and a ‘labor trees’ row—that is a phenomenological joke.

When Marx takes up labor as an isolated member of the ‘Trinity’, he writes, “‘*die Arbeit*’ to mimic, I believe, “‘the’ Fruit’. This gets lost in David Fernbach’s translation of “‘*die Arbeit*’ simply as ‘labour’ (Marx 1981: 954). Marx calls “‘the’ labour’ ‘a mere spectre ... nothing but an abstraction and taken by itself cannot exist at all’ (Marx 1981: 954). Taken in abstraction—a bad abstraction—from the two other necessary factors in the labor process, produced means of production and raw materials, human labor is not the source of *any* wealth.

A ROLE FOR GENERAL CONCEPTS IN MARX

Like Berkeley’s endorsement of general ideas while rejecting abstract ones, Marx’s phenomenological discovery that every provisioning process has a social form and purpose means that there is no production-in-general—that is a bad abstraction—but it does not mean that nothing can be said in general about production:

Whenever we speak of production, then, what is meant is always production at a definite stage of social development—production by social individuals.... However, all epochs of production have certain common traits, common characteristics. Production in general is an abstraction, but a rational abstraction in so far as it really brings out and fixes the common element and thus saves us repetition.... Nevertheless, just those things which determine their development, i.e. the elements which are not general and common, must be separated out from the determinations valid for production as such, so that in their unity—which arises already from the identity of the subject, humanity, and of the object, nature—their essential difference is not forgotten. The whole profundity of those modern economists who demonstrate the eternity and harmoniousness of the existing social relations lies in this forgetting. (Marx 1973: 85)

Care must be taken to distinguish between general categories and those that are specific to a mode of production. Marx does that here: ‘Labour is a natural condition of human existence, a condition of material interchange between man and nature, quite independent of the form of society. On the other hand, the labour which posits exchange-value is a specific social form of labor’ (Marx 1970a: 36). When the general and the socially specific are conflated, a category mistake is made, and general categories get twisted into bad abstractions.

HOW PRACTICAL ABSTRACTION GENERATES THE SUPERSENSIBLE SOCIAL OBJECTIVITY OF VALUE

Interpreting Marx’s theory of value poses many difficulties.¹² The first is to get past the tenacious mistake of identifying it with the classical or Ricardian labor theory of value. Marx does not base his theory of value on a general conception of labor; it is the specific social form that labor takes in capitalism that generates value. Value, Marx writes, is ‘purely social’: ‘It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things’ (Marx 1976: 165). Value is supersensible, a ‘phantom-like objectivity [*gespenstige Gegenstandlichkeit*]’ that is the consequence of the social form of labor in capitalism (Marx 1976: 128). Commodities have a contradictory double character: they are useful things (use-values) and values. As values, commodities are ‘merely congealed quantities of homogeneous human labor’ (Marx 1976: 128). Commodities owe their usefulness to

concrete labor; they owe their value to ‘human labor in the abstract’. Marx identifies ‘human labor in the abstract’ with human physiological expenditure of energy: ‘however varied the useful kinds of labour, or productive activities, it is a physiological fact that they are functions of the human organism, and that each such function, whatever may be its nature or its form, is essentially the expenditure of human brain, nerves, muscles and sense organs’ (Marx 1976: 164).

If congealed ‘human labor in the abstract’ is the substance of value, then how are we to think about abstract labor and its relation to value? Here is a thorny problem.

Isaak I. Rubin rightly insists that, for Marx, value is not something trans-historical but rather is specific to the capitalist mode of production. There are countless passages in Marx that support Rubin. For example, ‘It is only by being exchanged that the products of labour acquire a socially uniform objectivity as values’ (Marx 1976: 166). Value exists only where there is an extensive and well-established sphere of simple commodity circulation, that is, only where wealth is generally produced in the commodity form. Marx states that this is true only where capitalist production predominates (Marx 1976: 272). But this generates a conundrum that I call ‘Rubin’s dilemma’ (Murray 2016: 124ff). The problem is that if value is historically specific, and if congealed abstract labor is the substance of value, then abstract labor must be socially specific. Rubin puts it this way:

One of two things is possible: if abstract labor is an expenditure of human energy in physiological form, then value also has a reified-material character. Or value is a social phenomenon, and then abstract labor must also be understood as a social phenomenon connected with a determined social form of production. It is not possible to reconcile a physiological concept of abstract labor with the historical character of the value which it creates. (Rubin 1972: 135)

I agree, but, since Rubin has only one concept of abstract labor in play, he is forced to say that abstract labor is socially specific to capitalism.¹³ But this conflicts with passages in *Capital* such as ‘all labour is an expenditure of human labour-power, in the physiological sense’ (Marx 1976: 137). Is there a way out?

Moishe Postone comments that passages such as these ‘are very problematic. They seem to indicate that it [value] is a biological residue, that it is to be interpreted as the expenditure of human physiological energy’

(Postone 1993: 144). Like Rubin, Postone insists: ‘If, however, the category of abstract human labor is a social determination, it cannot be a physiological category’ (Postone 1993: 145). Postone concludes: ‘The problem, then is to move beyond the physiological definition of abstract human labor provided by Marx and analyze its underlying social and historical meaning’ (Postone 1993: 145). Yes, we must ‘move beyond the physiological definition of abstract human labor’, but not by eliminating it. There is no need to correct Marx; he provides what is needed. The dilemma arises not because Marx’s definitions of abstract human labor are problematic. No, the problem lies in thinking that Marx puts only one concept of abstract labor in play and, consequently, that he identifies abstract labor as value-producing labor. Labor is value-producing, Marx says, *insofar as* it is abstract: ‘it is *in this quality* of being equal, or abstract, human labour that it forms the value of commodities’ (Marx 1976: 137, my emphasis). It is fallacious to reason: since labor is value-producing only insofar as it is abstract, and since all labor can be analyzed as abstract, physiological labor, therefore all labor is value-producing. *Abstract labor is not value-producing labor*; in fact, abstract labor is not a kind of labor. It is not a candidate to be the cause of value.

The way out of the dilemma is to recognize that Marx has three concepts in play in the first chapter of *Capital*; two pertain to abstract labor. Marx has a *general concept of human labor*, which is his concept of concrete labor (Marx 1976: 128). All labor is concrete labor, labor that is *technically* specific, oriented to the accomplishment of specific purposes such as hammering nails to attach one board to another to construct a bookcase. The lesson of historical materialism is that all labor is *socially* specific as well. Marx highlights these two features of his general phenomenology of human labor: ‘If there is no production in general [Marx is summarizing the point that production always has a specific social form and purpose.], then there is also no general production. Production is always a particular branch of production—e.g. agriculture, cattle-raising, manufactures etc.—or it is a *totality*’ (Marx 1973: 86).

According to Marx’s general phenomenology of human labor, human labor is always socially and technically specific; there is no human labor in the abstract. Sound familiar?

The first concept relating to abstract labor is that of physiological exertion. Like the general concept of human labor, this concept is generally applicable; it cuts across human history: ‘all labour is an expenditure of human labour-power, in the physiological sense’ (Marx 1976: 137). This

concept abstracts from both social and technical particularity, which are inseparable from human labor. That phenomenological fact means that abstract labor in this physiological sense cannot stand on its own. Abstract labor is not a kind of labor, much less the kind of labor that could give rise to value. Rather, the concept of abstract labor as physiological exertion isolates and identifies a feature common to all human labor. The substance of value, congealed (socially necessary) abstract labor, is a bad abstraction. Dominated by the law of value, capitalist society is ruled by bad abstractions—a nightmare scenario for Berkeley. Since value results from practical abstraction—not a theoretical mistake—it can be overcome only by social action that replaces real abstraction as the dominant form of social mediation.

In view of the practical abstractions that characterize the capitalist mode of production, we can call value-producing labor, ‘practically abstract’. Postone rightly insists that we must ‘investigate the historically specific social relations that underlie value in order to explain *why* those relations appear and, therefore, are presented by Marx, as being physiological—as transhistorical, natural, and thus historically empty’ (Postone 1993: 145). Yes, but the answer lies in the concept of ‘practically abstract’ labor as labor that is socially validated in its most abstract characteristic, as physiological labor. Martha Campbell observes that it is social labor of this type that generates the ‘phantom-like objectivity’ of value: ‘The objectivity of value stems from the indirectly social (in other words, simultaneously private and social) character of production. The entire significance of money as universal equivalent is that it mediates (allows the existence of) this contradiction but does not remove it’ (Campbell 2004: 224).

This ‘indirectly social’ character of commodity-producing labor is what requires the money-mediated processes of ‘real abstraction’ in the circulation of wealth as capital; that is why the circulation of capital is ‘abstraction in action’. What distinguishes it and makes it ‘practically abstract’ is that labor in capitalist society is socially validated *as abstract, physiological labor*, with indifference toward its useful features.¹⁴

Marx needs to introduce the concept of abstract, physiological labor to explain the sense in which ‘practically abstract’ labor is abstract. From the opening sentence of *Capital*, Marx tells us that he is writing about those societies where wealth is generally produced in the commodity form. From the start, he is writing about the social sort of labor that produces commodities. How is commodity-producing labor socially validated? It is validated through the sale of its products. But that sale transforms prod-

ucts of every sort of concrete labor into quantities of money, extinguishing their concrete differences: ‘Circulation becomes the great social retort into which everything is thrown, to come out again as the money crystal’ (Marx 1976: 229). Here, we have a social process of *real abstraction*; this is a kind of bad abstraction that Berkeley did not contemplate.¹⁵ Commodity-producing labor is ‘practically abstract’ labor because it is socially validated *as* abstract, physiological labor, because it *counts* only as ‘mere congealed quantities of undifferentiated human labour’. Its specificity as useful labor is a matter of indifference, but *indifference is ‘practically abstract’ labor’s social character*, not the lack of one, just as being indifferent is a mood, not the absence of one. Capital covers its tracks by giving itself the appearance of lacking a social character altogether, but ‘within this world the general human character of labour forms its specific social character’ (Marx 1976: 159–160). ‘Practically abstract’ labor is a social kind of labor; it is value-producing labor.

CONCLUSION: MEASURING WEALTH BY A BAD ABSTRACTION

Marx works in the spirit of Berkeley in complementing analysis with phenomenological investigations to determine when the distinguishable is separable and when not. These investigations enable him to expose bad abstractions. Marx criticizes the bad abstractions of philosophy, especially those he finds in Hegel and Hegelianism; he employs his historical materialist insight that the production process always has a social form and purpose to disclose the bad abstractions of political economy; he criticizes the capitalist mode of production as rule by bad abstractions (value and capital) that result from social practices of real abstraction and he shows how capital ‘raises a dust’ by creating ‘the illusion of the economic’, which encourages and seems to validate the bad abstractions of political economy.

Value is socially instituted through real abstraction. In capital, value comes to life as ‘self-valorizing value’, ‘an automatic subject’. Through the price system and capital’s boundless drive to accumulate, value dominates the society that sustains it. In its indifference toward all use-values, value is a bad abstraction and a perverse measure of wealth. The perverseness of measuring wealth by a standard that violates the very nature of wealth—usefulness—reveals the power of bad abstraction over the society that generates it.

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NOTES

1. One aim of the present chapter is to argue that taking an interpretive perspective ‘from Berkeley to Marx’ provides a valuable vantage point on modern philosophy and political economy. In his *Interpreting Modern Philosophy*, James Collins discusses the significance of ‘reforming the from-to perspectives’ on modern philosophers (Collins 1972: 212–231).
2. Marx comments on the match between Berkeley’s philosophy and his nominalist theory of money: ‘Very fittingly it was Bishop Berkeley, the advocate of mystical idealism in English philosophy, who gave the doctrine of the nominal standard of money a theoretical twist’ (Marx 1970a: 78–79).
3. On Marx’s relationship to Bailey, see Chapters 6 and 17 of Murray (2016).
4. See Chapter 18 of Murray (1988).
5. We may wonder if Berkeley, with his talk of observing that certain colors, tastes, smells and so on ‘go together’, leading us to ‘account’ such a ‘collection’ as ‘one distinct thing’, may remain closer to Locke’s account of experience than he might like. On Hegel’s critique of Locke for putting simple ideas ahead of objects, see Schuler (2014).
6. See Chapter 11 of Murray (1988) and Chapters 8 and 9 of Murray (2016).
7. We may wonder if Marx is too clever. Is Marx imposing on Hegel by viewing him through the lens of his incipient critique of the practical bad abstractions of value and capital?
8. On these topics, see Murray (1988: 45–51).
9. Marx attributes Ricardo’s ‘inability to grasp the specific form of bourgeois production’ to his ‘obsession that bourgeois production is production as such’ (Marx 1968: 529).
10. Jürgen Habermas misreads Chapter 7 in this way. Consequently, he wrongly attributes to Marx a conception of labor (conceived of as instrumental or purposive-rational action) as ‘in principle solitary’ (Habermas 1971: 137). This misstep led Habermas away from Marx’s critical theory of value and capital toward a neo-Weberian critique of instrumental action.
11. See Chapter 14 of Murray (2016). Martha Campbell, in correspondence, points out that the phrase ‘fetishism of the factors of production’ should be corrected to ‘fetishism of the capitalist revenue forms, interest, rent, and wages’.
12. See Chapter 4 of Murray (2016).

13. Postone (1993) and Murray (1988), among others, follow Rubin in this reasoning.
14. ‘Practically abstract’ labor must produce useful things for which there is demand in order to produce value, but *how* it is useful is a matter of indifference.
15. Real abstraction in capitalism is not restricted to the circulation of money and commodities: it pervades the capitalist mode of production. One of the first interpreters to introduce the idea of real abstraction as a description of processes in capitalist society, Alfred Sohn-Rethel, did limit it to exchange (Sohn-Rethel 1978: 77–78). For a criticism, see Postone (1993: 178).

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PART II

Repercussions in the Method and in
the Critique of the Social System



On Capital as Real Abstraction

Werner Bonefeld

INTRODUCING REAL ABSTRACTION

Marx's critique of political economy recognizes that in capitalist society, Man is not the subject of his own social world. Rather, he is a personification of objectively unfolding economic forces that impose themselves on the acting individuals seemingly according to their own innate laws and by their own volition. Their movement enriches the owners of the means of life and is crisis-ridden, with often devastating effect on especially the direct producers of social wealth. At the blink of an eye, suddenly and without warning, amidst an accumulation of great social wealth and after prolonged struggles for better conditions, the economic forces tend to cut them off from access to the means of subsistence and then society 'suddenly finds itself put back into a state of momentary barbarism; it appears as if famine, a universal war of devastation had cut off the supply of every means of subsistence' (Marx and Engels 1997: 18).

In distinction to traditional Marxist accounts associated with dialectical materialism, the economic laws of development are not laws of some abstractly understood transhistorical economic nature that unfolds

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through history and which manifests itself in the historically specific modalities of concrete social relations. In distinction to this view, the circumstance that Man has to eat and therefore exchange with nature does not explain capitalism nor does capitalism derive from it. Man does not eat in the abstract. Critically understood historical materialism is critique of capitalist society understood dogmatically as natural. That is to say, the economic laws of development are entirely determined by the social relations of production. What appears in the appearance of society as a relationship between economic things is not some abstractly conceived nature. Rather, what appears in society as economic objectivity is Men in their social relations. That is, the so-called economic laws of development express the social nature of a definite form of social relations.¹ The question of ‘capital’ thus becomes a question about the social relationship between persons expressed as a relationship between economic things, that is, real economic abstractions.

In capitalism, Man is ruled by economic abstractions over which he has no control. The economic categories manifest social compulsion by real abstractions as natural necessity. Their natural force articulates the innate necessity of the capitalistically organized metabolism with nature. Marx’s critique of ‘the’ economists has therefore to do with the simple fact that they treat economic matter in distinction from society, transforming the social nature of the capitalist social relations into pretended laws of nature. Economics is the science of incomprehensible economic matter.²

The term real abstraction articulates the vanishing appearance of Man as an embodiment of the ghost-walking economic categories.³ In the literature, the ‘properties’ of real abstractions are sometimes referred to as ‘value abstraction’, ‘commodity abstraction’, ‘exchange abstraction’ and also as economic abstraction. Marx says that the ‘individuals are now ruled by *abstractions*’ (Marx 1973: 164). He also refers to ‘actual abstraction’ in the context of value as an actual abstraction from concrete labor, for which he uses the term ‘abstract labor’, which is the category of the value producing socially necessary labor.⁴ The contemporary use of the term real abstraction in the critique of political economy goes back to Sohn-Rethel (1971). He conceives of it as an abstraction from the use-value of the commodity, from its material quality. It manifests the commodity in purely quantitative terms. For him, real abstraction asserts itself in exchange. The category ‘real abstraction’ has thus to do with the value-validity of the private appropriation of social labor. Value-validity manifests itself in exchange. It presents itself in the form of money, expresses itself in a cer-

tain quantity of money and manifests value-validity in abstraction from its concrete character. One hundred pound of this is the same as a hundred pounds of that. That is, in capitalism, wealth, that is valorized value, presents itself without an atom of utility. That is, ‘there is no difference or distinction in things of equal value. One hundred pounds worth of lead or iron, is of as great a value as one hundred pounds worth of silver or gold’. The one is the ‘same as any other’ (Marx 1990: 127–128, 129). The act of an equivalent exchange therefore ‘implies the reduction of the products to be exchanged to their equivalents, to something abstract, but by no means—as traditional discussion would maintain—to something material’ (Adorno 1976: 80). The foundation of value equivalence cannot be found in ‘the geometrical, physical, chemical or other natural property of commodities. Such properties come into considerations only to the extent that they make the commodities useful, i.e. turn them into use values’ (Marx 1990: 139). According to Marx, value is the product of abstract labor—of labor in the abstract. Value equivalence expresses therefore something invisible that is neither divine nor natural in character. Something invisible ‘holds sway in reality [Sache] itself’ (Adorno 1976: 80) and presents itself, however sweepingly, in the money form, in which the exchange value of a commodity appears as a definite amount of money. Real abstraction crystallizes in money, and it is through money that the social bond of capitalist social reproduction is established. Commodities that cannot be exchanged for money are useless regardless of their concrete properties and the individual human needs that they could satisfy. What counts is value that expresses itself in the form of money, which is always also of money as more money. Labor expended in production is valid as value-producing labor only on the condition that it achieves value-validity in exchange, in which a concrete utility of the commodity is reduced to a pure quantity, expressed in money.⁵

Exploration of Sohn-Rethel’s ‘real abstraction’ has by and large been confined to Adorno-inspired accounts of the critique of political economy as a critical social theory. Indeed, one could argue that Adorno’s *Negative Dialectic* is a far-reaching critique of society as real abstraction (Bonefeld 2016a). After Adorno, the New Reading of Marx expounded ‘real abstraction’ into arguments about the dialectic of the value form (Backhaus 1997), exchange validity (Reichelt 2005) and conceptions of critique as ‘form-genetic explanations’ (Reichelt 1995, 2001; Backhaus 1992), which aim at uncovering the thing-like social relations as inverted forms of definite social relations. The ghost-walking economic categories, which Marx

expounds as ‘value in process, money in process and as such capital’ (Marx 1990: 256), are the categories of a social practice of real abstraction (see Arthur 2004; Backhaus 2005; Reichelt 2007). According to Sohn-Rethel (1978: 13) form-genetic explanation amounts to an anamnesis of the social origin, or genesis, of real economic abstraction.⁶ Negative dialectic as critique of political economy is the dialectic of the manner in which definite social relations vanish in their own social world only to reappear as, say, relations of price competitiveness. ‘Exchange principle and coldness’ (Adorno 2003: 35) are one and the same phenomenon of real abstraction. Real abstraction is the society as the (value-)thing (Lotz 2014: 114).

REAL ABSTRACTION AND OBJECTIVE ILLUSION: ON SOCIAL FORM

The natural character of capitalist society is both an actuality and a necessary illusion. The illusion signifies that within this society, economic laws assert themselves as natural processes that govern society as if by their own independent logic and volition. Traditional social theory conceives of government by (economic) things as system logic.⁷ In this argument, then, the definite character of the social relations of production establishes itself behind the backs of the acting subjects, who are compelled to accommodate to systemic demand.⁸ However real, their independent assertion is, nevertheless, an illusion because its validity arises from a definite mode of social reproduction. That is, Man is ‘governed by the product of his own hands’ (Marx 1990: 772), and it is his own social product that acts with the force of an elemental natural process. Indeed, the capitalist social relations assume the form a relationship between things, and that is, Man vanishes in his own social world only to reappear with a price tag. What appears in the appearance of society as an autonomic subject of valorization, of value as surplus value, of money as more money? What appears is not some economic nature. Rather, what appears is Man in his social relations as personification of an economic world that is governed by the movements of coins, beyond social control. Marx’s critique of political economy thinks against the spell of the dazzling economic forms. It wants to get behind their secrets, to demystify their fateful appearance as forces of nature. His critique does therefore not think about economic things. Rather, it thinks out of them to uncover their social foundation.

Marx's *Capital* is not an economic text. Economics is the formula of an inverted world of 'silent economic compulsion', of society under economic duress. The circumstance that every individual reacts 'under the compulsion' of economic forces begs the question of their origin and the manner in which they render individuals 'mere character masks, agents of exchange in a supposedly separate economic order' (Adorno 1990: 311). This stance raises the question about the meaning of critique in the critique of political economy. What is criticized? Marx saw his work as a 'critique of the *entire* system of economic categories' (Marx 1976: 254).⁹ Rather than arguing from the standpoint of some abstractly conceived materiality of labor, and connected arguments about how to regulate it in favour of this or that social interest, society in the form of real economic abstractions has to be understood from within its own conceptuality:

It is, in reality, much easier to discover by analysis the earthly kernel of the misty creations of religions than to do the opposite, i.e., to develop from the actual, given relations of life the forms in which they have become apotheosized. The latter method is the only materialist, and therefore the only scientific one. The weakness of the abstract materialism of natural science, a materialism which excludes the historical process, are immediately evident from the abstract and ideological conceptions expressed by its spokesmen whenever they venture beyond the bounds of their own speciality. (Marx 1990: 494, note 4)¹⁰

For the critique of political economy, the transformation of 'every product into a social hieroglyphic' requires explanation from within the actual social relations. We need, says Marx, 'to get behind the secret of [men's] own social product: for the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men's social product as is their language'. Thus, the fetishism of commodities 'arises from the peculiar social character of the labor that produces them' (167, 165), and not from some presumed natural materiality of labor.¹¹ Rather, the purpose of the critique of political economy is to establish the actual relations of life in their perverted appearance as real economic abstractions. Critique of economic categories is social critique. It is critique of the capitalist social relations as a system of objective illusion that in the form of real economic abstractions asserts itself as a force of nature. The critique of political economy does not amount to an alternative economic science. It rather negates the economic categories as inverted forms of historically specific social relations of human reproduction.

Human sensuous practice exists thus in the economic form of a super-sensible world of economic things. There is only one reality. Society is the economic thing, which is the inverted world. It contains the human subject within itself as personification of her own social world (see Reichelt 2005). That is, however inhospitable to the social individuals, the objective world of real economic abstraction is the constituted world of the social subject. Social reproduction appears thus to be governed by fate, that is, economic objectivity entails the assertion of the economic laws as forces ‘external to Man’ and as forces on which, as Adorno (1990: 320) put it, “the life of all men hangs by ... [to the] vanishing point in the death of all”—and yet what asserts itself behind their back is their own world. Men as the essence of society appears thus in the mischief [*Unwesen*] of a world that degrades them to a means of economic abstractions. What prevails over man prevails in and through them. Sensuous human practice subsists against itself in the form of, say, freedom as wage slavery. What lies within the concept of capitalist wealth—of value as surplus value—is its social nature. As personifications of real economic abstractions, the actions of the economic agents endow the inverted world of economic necessity with a consciousness and a will—and they do this “without being aware of it” (Marx 1990: 166–167).

Marx’s critique of political economy holds that the incomprehensible economic forces find their rational explanation in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice. It argues that the relations of economic objectivity manifest the social nature of an inverted [*verkehrte*] and perverted [*verrückte*] world of definite social relations. That is, it amounts ‘to a conceptualized praxis [*begriffene Praxis*]’ of the capitalist social relations in the form of real economic abstractions (Schmidt 1974: 207).

Marx’s work focuses on forms, at first on forms of consciousness (i.e. religion and law), then, later, on the forms of political economy. Following Reichelt (2000: 105), this focus ‘on forms was identical with the critique of the inverted forms of social existence, an existence constituted by the life-practice of human beings’. That is, every social ‘form’, even the most simple form like, for example, the commodity, ‘is already an inversion and causes relations between people to appear as attributes of things’ or, more emphatically, each form is a ‘perverted form’, which causes the social relations to appear as a movement of coins that govern the individuals as adjustable derivatives of the economic forces of cash, price and profit (Marx 1976: 508, 1990: 169). The movement of ‘coins’ expresses a definite social relationship between individuals subsisting as a relationship

between things and coins, and in this relationship, the actual social relations subsist but as coined factors of production. In capitalism, individuals are really governed by the movement of coins. Although coins tend to inflate or become depressed, coins are not subjects. Yet, they impose themselves on, and also in and through, the person to the point of madness and disaster, from the socially necessary consciousness of cash and product, money and profit, to abject misery and bloodshed. Capitalist wealth is money as more money, and the necessity of more money objectifies itself in the persons as mere ‘agents of value’ who depend for their life on the manner in which the logic of things unfolds. What a monstrosity! An economic thing, this coin, that really is nothing more than a piece of metal manifests itself as an economic quantity in fateful movement, asserts a power by which ‘the life of all men hangs by’. That is, the mythological idea of fate becomes no less mythical when it is demythologized ‘into a secular “logic of things”’ that akin to an abstract system-logic structures the economic behaviors of the actual individuals by means of competing price signals (Adorno 1990: 311, 320, 319).

The secular logic of things entails the bourgeois concept of social equality as a real abstraction. That is, equality of every member of society before money and before the rule of law is entirely formal in character. It recognizes individuals as abstract citizens, each endowed with standardized rights, regardless of the inequality in property. Furthermore, their formal equality as abstract citizens endowed with equal rights to trade at liberty from direct coercion, bound only by the rule of law, is governed by the money fetish. That is, the ‘power which each individual exercises over the activity of others or over social wealth exists in him as the owner of exchange value, of money. The individual carries his social power, as well as his bond with society, in his pocket’ (Marx 1973: 156–157). Marx writes of the money fetish that ‘a social relation, a definite relation between individuals ... appears as a metal, a stone, as a purely physical external thing which can be found, as such, in nature, and which is indistinguishable in form from its natural existence’ (1973: 239). Economic objectivity is a socially constituted objectivity—the social relations vanish in their appearance as a metal or a stone, and this appearance is real as power over, and in and through, them. What appears, in the appearance of society as an economic object, is a definite social relationship between individuals subsisting as relationship between economic things. The movement of economic things governs the class-divided individuals as formally equal citizens who, in and through their struggle for social reproduction, endow

pieces of metal with a consciousness and a will. This will asserts itself in the form of a seemingly natural force and regulation by invisible principles. Society appears as some transcendental thing that governs the social individuals by means of an ‘invisible hand’, which takes ‘care of both the beggar and the king’ (Adorno 1990: 251).

Marx grasps rule by economic abstractions with the category of capital. Capital is fundamentally just a name of a definite form of social relations.¹² Capital is society as economic thing, and this thing is fundamentally the value thing. Value is invisible, like a ghost (Bellofiore 2009). The ghost of value appears in the form of money as more money. To the point of ‘momentary barbarism’ (Marx and Engels 1997: 18) the class tied to work hangs by the profitable exploitation of her labor power. She maintains her employability, and therewith wage-based access to subsistence, only as an effective producer of surplus value. The buyer of labor power and the producers of surplus value contract on the labor market as formally equal citizens. The buyer contracts labor power as resource of profit. The worker sells to make a living. Labor-time that does not produce profit counts for nothing. It is either expended for profit or redundant. For the sake of profit, there is no time to lose. Unprofitable employers go bankrupt, leading to loss of employment. The notion that capitalist society is ruled by abstractions says therefore more than it first appeared. Life-time is labor-time. The struggle for life-time is constant, and so is the struggle to sustain access to the means of life by making a profit for the buyer of labor power. Economic objectivity hides what is important. Hidden within the appearance of society as a movement of economic quantities, vanished from view, is the sheer unrest of life to make ends meet—for the laborer, working for the profit of another class of Man is the necessary condition of making a living. That is, the laborer makes a living on the condition that the consumption of her labor power produces a surplus value for its buyer. What can the seller of redundant labor power trade in its stead—body and body substances: how many for pornography, how many for prostitution, how many for drug mules, how many for kidney sales?

The macro-economic calculation of the unemployed as economic zeros is not untrue. It makes clear that the life of the sellers of labor power really depend for their life on the profitability extraction of surplus value from their labor. Laboring for the sake of a surplus in value is innate to the concept of the worker. She belongs to a system of wealth in which her labor has utility only as a means of profit. Sensuous activity not only vanishes in the supersensible world of economic things, of cash, price and profit. It

also appears in it—as working class struggle to sustain access to the means of subsistence and as conflict on competitive labor markets to avoid the risk of redundancy. It also appears as competition between the employers of labor power to avoid bankruptcy as each tries in competition with all others to validate their private appropriation of social labor in the form of value, that is, money as general equivalent of the socially necessary expenditure of labor-time. The economic argument that profit is a means of avoiding bankruptcy is not untrue. It articulates the truth of society as economic abstraction. Each individual capitalist has constantly to expand ‘his capital, so as to preserve it, but he can only extend by means of progressive accumulation’ (Marx 1990: 739). Thus, each individual capitalist is spurred into action to maintain his connection to abstract wealth by means of greater surplus value extraction, on the pain of avoiding competitive erosion and liquidation of existing values. Each individual capitalist is therefore compelled to compress necessary labor-time of social reproduction so as to increase the surplus labor-time of surplus value production, expanding wealth in the form of profit by multiplying the productive power of labor.

The fact that the rule of economic abstractions benefits the owners of great wealth does not entail that they are in control. The personalized critique of capitalism does not touch capitalism by thought. Rather, it both rejects the capitalist as corrupting capitalist development for its own self-interest and identifies capital as an economic instrument that can be employed for the benefit of the property-less producers of surplus value. In this manner, the critique of the capitalist transforms into an argument for the further development of capitalism, ostensibly for the benefit of the class that works. For the sake of making capitalism work for the workers, it argues for the full-employment of social labor and envisages the transformation of society into a centrally planned factory.¹³

REAL ABSTRACTION AND THE TIME OF WEALTH

I have argued that the commodity form disappears as a social relationship; instead, it asserts an abstract economic logic, which manifests the vanished social subject as a personification of objective economic laws. The capitalist social subject is a value subject of profitable equivalent exchange relations. The argument of this section expounds the meaning of this last sentence. It starts with an exploration of the contradictory character of profitable equivalent exchange relations. Exchange is either an exchange

between equivalent values or it is profitable; in bourgeois society, it is both—a contradiction in terms, which is immanent to its objective illusion.

The capitalist exchange relations are equivalent exchange relations. Between two equal values, there is no difference or distinction. Exchange equivalence is entirely abstract, in that it is indifferent to the concrete utility of the things that are exchanged. Exchange equivalence expresses something invisible that is neither divine nor natural in character. In Marx's argument, it expresses the private appropriation of socially necessary labor-time in the form of money as general equivalent of capitalist wealth (Marx 1990: chap. 1, sect. 3). The exchange-value of a commodity appears as a definite amount of money. In the form of money capitalist wealth manifests the 'continually vanishing realisation of value' (Marx 1973: 209). Once value is expressed in the form of money, it has to be posited again and again to maintain its 'occult ability to add value to itself' (Marx 1990: 255)—money is thrown into circulation to beget more money, which is realized in the form of profit by means of an equivalent exchange (M...M', say £100 = £120). The conceptuality of this 'bewitched' reality of an equivalent exchange between money and more money is independent 'of the consciousness of the human beings subjected to it' (Adorno 1976: 80) at the same time as which it prevails only in and through the social individuals themselves. The private appropriation of socially labor acquires value-validity in exchange with money as the equivalent form of wealth. What is not validated is devalued and destroyed regardless of the human needs that could be satisfied. Money validates the value of things. 'Illusion dominates reality' (Adorno 1976: 80), and it does so because '[e]xchange value, merely a mental configuration when compared with use value, dominates human needs and replaces them' (ibid.). Understanding of the relations of production is key to unlocking the social constitution of money as the automatic fetish of capitalist wealth, that is, wealth in the form of a real abstraction.

In Marx's argument, the concept of socially necessary labor-time is the most important. Marx's familiar definition of the social constitution of value—'socially necessary labour time is the labour-time required to produce any use-value under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society'—expresses the social character of the private appropriation of labor in the form of a universal commensurability of a time made abstract (Marx 1990: 129). This time appears in homogeneous units that add to themselves, seemingly from time-immemorial to eternity. Time

appears as a force of its own progress, moving forward relentlessly by adding units of time to itself, as if it were a force of nature that ticks and tocks human life dissociated from the time of actual events. This appearance is real. In capitalism ‘time is ontologised’ (Adorno 1990: 331). This ontologized time is the time of value, and the time of value is the time of socially necessary labor. The time of value is a real abstraction. It asserts itself in exchange as an equivalent exchange between equal units of social labor-time.¹⁴ The holy trinity of social labor, socially necessary labor-time, and value-validity in exchange is invisible. Its objectivity is spectral. Nevertheless, the ghostlike objectivity of value becomes visible in the money form; back in production, the ghost turns into a Vampire that feeds on living labor as the human material of value that begets a surplus and is thus greater than itself (see Bellofiore 2009: 185). Socially necessary labor-time is not fixed and given. The labor-time that ‘was yesterday undoubtedly socially necessary for the production of a yard of linen, ceases to be so to-day’ (Marx 1990: 202). Whether the concrete expenditure of labor-time is valid as socially necessary labor-time can only be established *post-festum* in exchange. On the pain of ruin, the expenditure of living labor is thus done in the hope that it will turn out to be socially necessary, and that it will thus achieve value-validity in exchange with money. ‘Time is money’, said Benjamin Franklin, and one might add that therefore money is time. If, then, capitalism reduces everything to time, an abstract time, divisible into equal, homogeneous and constant units that move on from unit to unit, dissociated from concrete human circumstances and purposes, then, time really is everything. If *time is everything, [then] man is nothing; he is, at the most, time’s carcass* (Marx 1975: 127)—a carcass of ‘personified labour-time’ (Marx 1990: 352–353). Expenditure of socially valid labor does not occur in its own good time. It occurs within time, that is, the time of value as expenditure of socially necessary labor-time. The abstraction of the exchange process, which Sohn Rethel’s term real abstraction highlights, ‘lies therefore not in the abstracting mode of thought by the sociologist, but in society itself’ (Adorno 1997b [2000]: 32). That is, ‘the conversion of all commodities into labour-time is no greater an abstraction, but is no less real, than the resolution of all organic bodies into air’ (Marx 1971: 30). The time of capitalist labor appears in the form of a profitable accumulation of some abstract form of wealth, of money that yields more money. What cannot be turned into profit is burned.

The capitalist exchange relations posit the exchange of money for more money as an equivalent exchange (M...M’). What appears in the appear-

ance of an equivalent exchange of money as more money is the difference between the value of labor power and the total value produced during the working day. The value of labor power is the socially necessary labor-time required for the social reproduction of labor power. It is thus the time needed for the reproduction of a class of workers. The employment of labor power reproduces this value of labor power during a certain part of the working day, which Marx calls necessary labor-time. Any time spent at work beyond this labor-time is in surplus to the reproduction of the value of labor-power. Marx calls this labor-time surplus labor-time. It is the time of surplus value production. The mysterious character of an equivalent exchange of money for more money has thus to do with the transformation of the commodity labor power into a surplus value producing labor activity (M...P...M').¹⁵ For the sake of more money, the reduction of the labor-time spent by the worker to reproduce her life is of the essence. It is the condition for extending the labor-time beyond the time necessary for the (simple) reproduction of society. This extended labor-time comprises the surplus labor-time that expands social wealth, creating a surplus in value, the foundation of profit. The understanding, then, of the mysterious character of an equivalence exchange between unequal values lies 'in the concept of surplus value' (Adorno 1997a [1962]: 508). Expanding on Sohn-Rethel's concept of real abstraction as a matter arising in exchange, Adorno thus argues that the equivalence exchange relations are founded 'on the class relationship' between the owners of the means of production and the producers of surplus value, and he argues that this social relationship vanishes in its economic appearance as an exchange between one quantity of money for another (506). Society as real abstraction of economic objectivity encompasses surplus value extraction as its hidden premise.

CONCLUSION

Neither the capitalist nor the banker, nor, indeed, the worker can extricate themselves from the reality in which they live and which asserts itself not only over them but also through them, and by means of them. Society as economic subject prevails through the individuals. Money does not only make the world go round, its possession establishes the connection to the means of life. The struggle for access to the means of life is a struggle for money—it governs the mentality of bourgeois society. What a misery! In

the face of great social wealth, the producers of surplus value sustain themselves from one day to the next as the readily available human material for capitalist wealth. Indeed, making ends meet is the real life-activity of living labor. Nothing is what it seems. The struggle for money (as more money) governs the mentality of bourgeois society as, seemingly, a thing in-itself. The ‘movement of society’ is not only ‘antagonistic from the outset’ (Adorno 1990: 304). It also ‘maintains itself only through antagonism’ (311). That is, class struggle is the objective necessity of the false society. It belongs to its concept. Hidden within ΔK rages the struggle to make ends meet and achieve social reproduction.¹⁶ The working class does not struggle for socialism. It struggles to satisfy its needs. The struggle of the dispossessed sellers of labor power is ‘dictated by hunger’ (Adorno 2005: 102).

In distinction to traditional Marxist conceptions, to be a productive laborer is not an ontologically privileged position. Rather, ‘it is a great misfortune’ (Marx 1990: 644). In *Capital*, Marx develops the capitalist class relations from the sale of the commodity labor power. However, the trade in labor power presupposes the divorce of dependent labor from the means of subsistence, creating the property-less laborer as the independent seller of labor power. Coercion as the foundation of the sale of labor and economic compulsion is the condition of the free and equal trade in labor power (see Bonfeld 2011). On the one hand, the labor market is the institution of the buying and selling of labor power on the basis of contract between formally equal traders—the one buying for the sake of making a profit, the other selling for the sake of making a living. On the other it comprises labor market competition between individualized sellers of labor power, each seeking to maintain themselves in gendered and racialized, and also nationalized labor markets where the term cutthroat competition is experienced in various forms, from arson attack to class solidarity, and from destitution to collective bargaining, from gangland thugery to communal forms of organizing subsistence-support, from strike-breaking to collective action.

Innate to the existence of a class of dispossessed sellers of labor power is the struggle, collectively or against each other, or both, for access to the means of subsistence. The struggle of the working class is one for wages and conditions; it is a struggle for access to the means of life and for life. It is a struggle against the buyer’s ‘were-wolf’s hunger for surplus labour’ and appropriation of additional atoms of unpaid labor-time, and thus

against the reduction of their life to a mere time's carcass. They struggle against a life constituting solely of labor-time and thus against a reduction of human life to a mere economic resource, and they struggle for employment to establish access to the means of life. They thus struggle for human significance and, above all, for food, shelter, clothing, warmth, love, affection, knowledge, time for enjoyment and dignity. Their struggle as a class 'in-itself' really is a struggle 'for-itself': for life, human distinction, life-time and, above all, satisfaction of basic human needs. The working class struggles for making ends meet, for subsistence and comfort. It does all of this in conditions, in which the increase in material wealth that it has produced pushes beyond the limits of its capitalist form. And then, repeating an earlier quotation, society 'suddenly finds itself put back into a state of momentary barbarism; it appears as if famine, a universal war of devastation had cut off the supply of every means of subsistence' (Marx and Engels 1997: 18).

The dictum that 'capital is class struggle' (Holloway 1991: 170) does not express something positive or desirable. Rather, it amounts to a judgment on the capitalistically organized social relations of production, in which 'the needs of human beings, the satisfaction of human beings, is never more than a sideshow' (Adorno 2008: 51). The class struggle is the dynamic force of the society as the thing of real economic abstraction, of wealth as a value abstraction.

In conclusion, the critique of class society does not find its positive resolution in the achievement of fair and just exchange relations between the buyers of labor power and the producers of surplus value. Redistribution of wealth in favor of property-less workers 'who chew word to fill their bellies' (Adorno 2005: 102) is absolutely necessary to sustain them in greater comfort. For this reason, redistribution is also the convenient fiction of a socialist critique, which envisages capitalist transformation in the form of a labor economy that is comfortable for the wage slaves. The critique of class society finds its positive resolution only in the classless society, in which the social individuals no longer objectify themselves in the form of a movement of real economic abstractions that are fed by a dependent class of surplus value producers. Rather, this society objectifies itself as a society of communist individuals.

NOTES

1. On the points raised here, see Gunn (1992), Murray (2016), Postone (1993) and Bonefeld (2014). On social nature, see Schmidt (1971).
2. Economics deals with economic quantities without being able to tell us what they are. For the sake of establishing itself as a science of economy matters, it seeks to make economic things intelligible. For this reason, it rejects the inclusion of the human social relations into economic argument as a metaphysical distraction. Economics is, however, quite unable to establish itself as social science in distinction to society. As Joan Robinson put it in exasperation about the seeming inability of economics to establish itself as a science of economic matter: ‘K is capital, ΔK is investment. Then what is K? Why, capital of course. It must mean something, so let us get on with the analysis, and do not bother about these officious prigs who ask us to say what it means’ (1962: 68). On the difficulty of economics to establish itself as a discipline without subject matter, see Bonefeld (2014 chap. 2).
3. On ghost-walking, see Marx (1966, chap. 48).
4. On abstract labor, see Bonefeld (2010).
5. On Sohn-Rethel conception of real abstraction, see Engster and Schlaudt (2018).
6. The German original says *Historischer Materialismus ist Anamnese der Genese*.
7. Traditional social theory divides society into system-logic and social action and considers this divide as a dialectic of structure and struggle or structure and agency, which is the premise of hegemonic social theory (see Bonefeld 1993, 2016b). Economics conceives of it as a relationship between spontaneous market structure and rational individual behavior.
8. In distinction, Habermas’ social theory accords to acting subjects the power to prevent the total colonization of their life-world by the forces of the system, keeping a space for non-instrumental properties, such as empathy and human warmth. On Habermas as a traditional thinker of system-logic and social action, see Reichelt (2000) and Henning (2018).
9. Emphasis added, and translation altered, based on the German original.
10. See Postone (1993) for a critique of Marxian economics as a series of programmatic statements about the rational planning of essentially capitalist labor relations. Contemporary notions of anti-austerity as a politics of economic planning present the same misconceived idea. See, for example, Panitch et al. (2011) and Varoufakis (2013). For critique, see Bonefeld (2012) and Grollios (2016).
11. As the tradition of dialectical materialism argues wrongly. On this point, see also footnote 1.
12. On this, see Bonefeld (2014).

13. Leninism is not an alternative to capitalism, nor are its reformist competitors or radical off-springs.
14. On this, see Bonefeld (2010).
15. M...P...M' (or M...M', for short) is the classical expressions for the transformation of Money into the Production of essentially surplus value that is realized in exchange in the form of greater amount of Money that expresses the extracted surplus value in the form of profit. See Bonefeld (1996) for a fuller account.
16. On ΔK , see footnote 2.

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The Lost Roads and the Steep Paths of ‘Real Abstraction’

Jacques Bidet

The expression ‘real abstraction’ was created by Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1978) in an attempt to elaborate a theory of abstraction no longer based on the Humean empiricism or the Kantian transcendental apriorism, but on historical materialism. This led him to consider market relations—he understood as *exchange* relations—which developed in the Bronze Age and eventually gave rise to the ‘money form’ in the seventh century BCE. In his view, *conceptual* abstraction, which allows the development of science and mathematics, has been based on a *real* abstraction, that of the exchange relations by which all commodities become comparable. It means abstraction does not ultimately belong as such to the sphere of spirit, of culture, but primarily to that of social structure.

Those who were inspired by this idea—such as Moishe Postone, Robert Kurz and Anselm Jappe—perceived that it must be understood not in terms of epistemology, but of social theory. But, in their opinion, this ‘real

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abstraction' results not from *commodity exchange*, but from *capitalist production*, which they think is to be based on abstract labor. Yet, this abstraction itself is supposed to be produced by the market relations inherent to the *capitalist mode of production*. In my opinion, this thesis confuses the notions of abstraction, abstract labor and real abstraction. This confusion muddles up the set of the structural, historical and political analyses it inspires. Its most extreme formulation can be found in Postone's (1993) work. It is also prevalent in what I call the 'esoteric school'—in reference to an esoterism attributed to Marx by Hans Georg Backhaus (1978) and assumed as such by these authors¹—which tends to read *Capital* on the base of its drafts and preliminary versions and, therefore, on formulations that Marx eventually discarded when they proved unsuited to his project. Its main focus is the current known as *Neue Wertkritik*² that certainly shares affinities with other currents, particularly those emerging from situationism, in the cultural and environmental critique of capitalism. In my view, however, its core political content does not really exceed this mixture of protest and resignation defined by Marx as that of religion. I argue against these authors not on their conclusions, but their presuppositions, which are also present in various contemporary philosophical commentaries of *Capital* and approaches of Marxism. That is why I formulate my critique only by putting forward my own approach of this problem.

WE MUST DISTINGUISH THREE LEVELS OF ABSTRACTION IN CAPITAL

Regarding labor, Marx's theoretical exposition involves the distinction among three levels of 'theoretical' abstraction that require specific designations. I shall specify as L1, L2 and L3: Level 1 (L1), *labor in general*; Level 2 (L2), *market labor*, that is, labor involved in market production as such; Level 3 (L3), *capitalist labor*, this is, waged labor in capitalist relations.³ We know how this approach from 'the abstract to the concrete' is important for Marx, as subsequently pointed out by Althusser. The 'concrete-of-thought' ('le concret de pensée'), which is the culmination, the result, of the conceptual elaboration, must not be confused with the 'real-concrete', the really existing thing. The former helps us to discover and understand the latter. Since real-concrete phenomena can be affected by the 'real abstraction', the greatest attention must be paid not to confuse the two registers: theoretical abstraction and real abstraction.

Labor in general (L1). At the beginning of chapter 1 in Volume 1, Marx analyzes labor, on the one hand, as *concrete labor* performed in a specific way, thanks to specific means of production and for a specific end, and, on the other hand, as *abstract labor*, an 'expenditure of human labour force', a 'productive expenditure of human brains, muscles, nerves, hands, etc.' (MEW 23 1962: 58), abstracting all these concrete specificities. Such a definition is evidently valid for 'labor in general' (L1), at least insofar as such a concept is relevant. The expression 'labor in general' does not imply the idea of a human nature, identical everywhere since 'humankind' exists. It only means that, as far as a practice that can be called 'labor' takes place, it consists of producing a supposedly useful object by the least expenditure of labor force, this means as well, in the least possible time, or trying to obtain the best possible result in a given time. This is the specific rationality of this practice, by contrast with that of playing, praying, or of artistic or sexual activity. There is no reason to believe that this only begins with market production. The construction of the pyramids, of the great irrigation canals and so on was certainly subject to such an imperative.

It is sometimes argued that, before modernity, no *pure* labor existed, that is, labor in this 'abstract' form because labor was always intermingled with other activities. But the same might be said for the present times. Computer labor, for instance, is coupled with an artistic practice when it is done with background music. That does not free the computer worker from time constraints or from the imperative to minimize effort. To put it briefly, this 'concrete impurity' of the labor process does not suppress its characteristic of 'abstract labor'.

Furthermore, as 'abstract' labor refers to the *expenditure* of labor force, it has a *substantial* and, in this sense, a 'concrete' character connected to physiology and psychophysiology. But this 'physiologic feature' is not simply that of medicine. It belongs to a specific *social* context: the body at work is subject to historically-defined social constraints of productivity and intensity, for instance, those of the market which Marx is dealing with here. Moreover, although he gave up the idea of explicitly presenting that level L1 in itself,⁴ the concepts of abstract labor and concrete labor introduced in chapter 1 of *Capital* possess this *general* scope: labor as such is, at the same time, concrete and abstract. All *types* of social labor, all 'social forms of production', all 'social divisions of labor', are precisely specific modes of articulation between these two terms—concrete labor and abstract labor. The market is just a particular case.⁵

Market labor (L2). Marx does not begin his exposition at L1, but directly at L2. And what makes it somehow difficult to read is that he deals with L1 within his exposition of L2. L2 actually implies level L1. In particular, it implies the pair constituted by concrete labor/abstract labor. But Marx relates it to another pair, that of use value/exchange value or (equivalently in this regard) use value/*value*. The problem he is facing here in the initial moment of his exposition is that of the *passage* not from L1 to L2, but within L2 from the concept of ‘exchange value’, which corresponds to the common evidence of market relation, to the concept of ‘value’ that will take its place in his theory as that of ‘production relation’ (*Produktionverhältnis*), a recurring term at L2. In other words, Marx is *building the concept of value*. To account for it, we need a term that is not part of his terminology but belongs, nonetheless, to his conceptual register: ‘market labor’. Indeed, labor as analyzed at the beginning of chapter I is labor under the conditions of market production: those of competition among independent productions. This context determines both a ‘value’ by the socially-necessary labor time and a ‘market price’ (term which belongs to this same rational conceptual configuration of L2) by the conditions of supply and demand. The ‘socially-necessary time’ relates simultaneously to the concrete labor (the technique used) and the abstract labor (the intensity of the expenditure) *in a market context*. In short, the pair (L1) of concrete labor/abstract labor is analyzed here in the context of *market production*, that is to say, of the relation between use value/*value* which belongs to L2. And Marx *builds* the concept of ‘value’ in the specific sense in which it will function in his theory. Meaningfully, the examples he chooses, not for pedagogic simplification, but for their *conceptual* scope (the carpenter, the mason) belong to the L2 of abstraction in which, as he states in a small but extremely significant note, he still leaves aside the question of whether or not this labor is included in a *waged* capitalist relation (MEW 23 1962: 59 note 15).

Capitalist labor: waged labor in the capitalist mode of production (L3). Such a labor is, first, ‘labor in general’; therefore, it cannot be said more or less abstract than any other kind of labor. It is also ‘market labor’, subject to the conditions of productivity and intensity of market relations which provide abstract labor with its specific characteristics (see the complex relations between intensity, productivity and value). It is, finally, specifically capitalist labor because, in its concrete and in its abstract aspects, it displays characteristics which are not simply those of market production as such. Thus, again, I propose a term which does not belong to Marx’s

terminology, but certainly to its conceptual register: 'capitalist labor'. That is, labor performed for capital, which Marx calls, in that sense, 'productive labor' (producing surplus value), as opposed to 'non-productive' labor, for instance, unpaid housekeeping. It is a kind of labor that is both *free*, in the sense that the worker can change employers (at least, in principle... apart from other possibilities) and *subordinated*. And it is a kind of labor that is *performed with the aim of accumulation of capital*. Two features are connected with this context.

On the one hand, the *expenditure* of labor force by the waged worker, as abstract labor, has its counterpart in its '*consumption*' by the capitalist, according to an expression, which is recurrent in Marx. This pair of expenditure/consumption belongs to L3. In contrast with Rubin, it must be said that here abstract labor has a 'physiologically' concrete substance. Labor power, subject to capital, is spent under the coercion of interests that are indifferent to its survival and tend to weigh on it until exhaustion, thus giving rise to concrete struggle for survival—a bottom-up biopolitics (Bidet 2016). In other words, there are good reasons to be careful about the terms, 'concrete' and 'abstract', which function as labels attached to jars of jelly. It is advisable to examine these categories in order to determine which theoretical substance formulated in this formal philosophical language they contain.

On the other hand, the characteristic of this 'capitalist' labor is to be *exploited* in pursuit of an *abstract wealth*: the surplus value. In this regard, the considerable problems found in the texts of the 'esoteric' current come from the confusion between the *abstraction of value* (L2) and the *abstraction of surplus value* (L3), which makes it impossible to understand their mutual relations defining the context of real abstraction. In my conceptual terminology (but the concept itself is Marxian), L2 is that of 'metastructure' and L3, that of the 'structure'.

THE REAL ABSTRACTION OF VALUE AND THE REAL ABSTRACTION OF SURPLUS VALUE

Value and surplus value are properly *real* abstractions in the sense that they are included in a really existing social logic, in abstraction processes which are embedded in the social structure itself. They are two processes dialectically connected. But, to reach that point, we must first identify what makes their differences.

Let us first consider *value*. It means we go back to L2. The true object of the first chapter of *Capital* is not ‘the commodity’ as a particular item, an element of a set, but the *social relation* that defines it: the market relations of production-circulation. You simply cannot understand the question if you suppose that the object of the beginning of Marx’s exposition is ‘circulation’ or market *exchange* as the esoteric current does⁶ for value is properly defined by the socially-necessary time under market *relations of production*. This is the starting point for understanding how it is ‘transformed’ immediately into ‘market price’ and, subsequently, into price of production’. What is described here is the set of the *rational* conditions required for market *production* (whose counterpart is market *circulation*). Market practice, that is, production for exchange, implies an abstraction: the partners leave aside the use value of the commodity. Money, which ensures universal exchange by making it possible to ‘abstract’ the concrete nature of the exchanged object, is the keystone of this rational edifice. In reality, this abstraction is never absolute: the concrete aspect of the use value appears in different ways. In the process of market *circulation*, it is somehow ‘on hold’, waiting for its moment, that of consumption. In the process of market *production*, on the contrary, the abstract is immediately connected to the concrete. The market, as a relation of production, *Produktionsverhältnis*, is a kind of defined articulation, historically specific, between concrete labor and abstract labor, which makes it possible for different productions to be linked with coherence. It is one form of coordination among others: from the beginning, Marx mentions by contrast other possibilities—from (slightly imaginary, no doubt) the Indian community to the large rural patriarchal family and the systematic (and quite real) division of labor in factories (MEW 23 1962: 56–57; 92.). Here, that enables us to apprehend adequately the social *rationality* of value, that of the market, *as a real abstraction*. To grasp the *concrete aspect*, it includes, one must start not from circulation, but from the logic of (market) *production*. This is what the esoteric school does not seem to understand.

As for *surplus value*, it belongs to the logic of *capitalist* production as such: that of market production when labor force itself functions as a commodity. Thus, we must distinguish between the abstraction of value and the abstraction of surplus value. In the process of capitalist exploitation, a worker produces an object (good or service) of a higher value than the goods that he receives as salary—this is, at least, a minimal formulation of the question. It is important here to observe that Marx makes a minimal use of the expression ‘*producing value*’. He essentially uses it in the

distinctive pair of 'constant capital'/'variable capital', or $c + v$: in the process of capitalist production, a waged worker 'produces value v ', equal to his salary, and 'transfers value c ', that of the used means of production, and also produces a value s , a 'surplus value'. In this context, Marx aims to demonstrate that the process is not oriented toward the production of *value*, but of *surplus value*. In fact, it would make no sense for the capitalist to 'produce value'. On the contrary, as is well known, the capitalists aim at *reducing* the individual value of the commodities they produce, at producing them in the least possible time: such is the law of competition. They do not aim at accumulating commodities or value, but surplus value: this abstract wealth thanks to which they will be able to appropriate more means of production and more labor power in order to produce not more value or more commodities, but, ultimately, more surplus value.... Surplus value is not just an increase in value, but a different concept: the concept of another social relation. Therefore, value and surplus value refer to social powers of very different kinds. Value corresponds to *power over things*. For Marx, there are two 'value forms': commodity and money. Surplus value represents *power over people*: it allows the purchase not only of means of production but also of labor forces and it makes possible their exploitation. Value and surplus value are concepts of quite different kinds.⁷

The real abstraction of value is linked to the *rationality* of market relations while the real abstraction of surplus value to the *irrationality* of capitalist relations. Market rationality remains present at the heart of capitalist irrationality. But capitalist irrationality is not to be found in market rationality. That is what the supporters of the esoteric school and many others do not understand.

Clearly, we cannot stop here for the market includes an irrational mode: 'market fetishism'. This is what we shall now take into consideration.

FETISHISM: THE METASTRUCTURAL ORIGIN OF REAL ABSTRACTION

The Original Social Act, Founder of the Market

From the very beginning of *Capital*, Marx deals with *capitalism*. But, at L2, he tackles it as embedded in a more general social logic, that of the *market*. In chapter 1, §4, he analyzes what he calls 'the fetishism of commodity'. Commodities seem to be things exchanged between each other,

and it is forgotten that, behind those things that are granted a value, what is ultimately exchanged is human labor: it is forgotten that the market is a relation of *production*. All this is well known and easily understood. What remains more problematic is the following of the (conceptual) story. In chapter 2, Marx actually proceeds from *commodity fetishism* to *market fetishism*, that is, from a *phenomenology* to an *ontology*. This chapter begins with a sentence seemingly trivial, but actually rather enigmatic: ‘It is plain that commodities cannot go to market and make exchanges of their own account’. Still, there must exist a market. In other words, the market is not a fact naturally given in a society, a natural order which commodities themselves would belong to. According to Marx, for the market to exist in this way in this seemingly *natural* form, a *social act* is actually needed: an inaugural act (‘In the beginning was the deed’ *Im Anfang war die Tat*), a ‘social act’ (*die Gesellschaftliche Tat*), a ‘social action’ (*die Gesellschaftliche Aktion*) or even a decisive ‘normal social act’ (English version). This act is a both ‘social and general’ (*allgemein gesellschaftlich*) and, at the same time, an ‘individual’ act (*individuell*), and therefore it is incessantly repeated by social actors. It consists of positioning ourselves under the law of the market, of freely deciding that the market should reign as our master. This is what Marx expresses in an apocalyptic formula which is also a remake of Hobbes. ‘These have one mind and shall give their power and strength onto the beast’. The ‘beast’ to which they thus make themselves subject is not capital, but money, as an arbiter of the market. When they convert the market into a law, they subject themselves to the law of the market. This is a contradiction in terms, analogous to the contract of servitude mentioned by Rousseau, which is a real social contradiction. This *original act of the market* introduced in chapter 2 is the presupposition of capitalism: a *presupposition* that capitalism *poses* as a universal law because it tends to convert labor force itself and every available use value into commodities. In this sense, fetishism is actually the *fact* of capitalism, making an absolute of a market logic. It must be observed here that Marx conceives the matter in terms of a social ontology in which the *being* is an *act*. To be is to act. This is a metastructural act of L2, but only possible and posed as such in the structural conditions of L3, that of capitalism, when the market really becomes the universal order.

This is what can be said about capitalism when it has not yet been introduced as such, that is, as a class *structure* founded in exploitation, but only from the viewpoint of the market logic that governs it (that of its *meta-structure*), that is, when nothing is known about it, except that it is

expected to be the full realization of a market order. And that is shown as frightening. Nonetheless, the reader may legitimately wonder if such social order completely under the rule of market fetishism actually *exists*. In other words, what is the ontological status of this concept? Is fetishism a direct product of a market logic? Or only the possible result of the *abandonment* to such a logic?

*The Other Original Act, the Act of Organization, That Appears
at the End*

To answer those questions, it should be first observed that this *fetishist* decision introduced in chapter 2 is the opposite of another one which had been evoked at the end of chapter 1: 'Let us finally imagine [...] an association of free men, working with means of production held in common, and expending their many different forms of labour-force in full self-awareness as one single social labour force'.⁸ A decision to associate for planning. But, Marx writes, this point of the 'freely associated human, acting consciously and masters of their own social movement', can only be reached at the end of a 'long and painful development'. And that is what is outlined in *Capital*. To sum up, these two contrary 'decisions' are presented both symmetrically and asymmetrically: one, the decision for the market at the beginning of the 'logical' exposition and, the other one, the decision for the organization at the end of the 'historical' exposition. In other words, Marx begins by exposing the market logic of production (Part 1), which makes it possible to analyze the capitalist *structure* (Part 3). Then, he moves on (notably from Part 7, 'The Process of Accumulation of Capital') to the analysis of the historic *tendency* of this structure. The development of capitalism leads to the emergence of increasingly large companies. As this concentration increases, we are approaching the 'ante-chamber of socialism'. Gradually, the conditions for a revolutionary process are met. The workers will appropriate the means of production and will be able to produce according to a commonly agreed plan. This is the rather surprising way in which the 'great narrative'—consisting of a structural analysis followed by a historical analysis—proceeds from *market* capitalist coordination to *organizational* socialist coordination.

*The Order of Exposition in Capital: The Cunning
of the ‘Great Narrative’*

Marx was wrong in his historical forecast. We must try to find out on which theoretical error this prognosis rests. He started, however, from a strong position. He is the first economist to organize his discourse around the market/organization pair, an essential invention at the center of his ‘critique of political economy’. In *Grundrisse*, he already puts forth the idea that there are two forms of rational coordination on a social scale, defining them as ‘mediations’. For social production to be possible, he writes, ‘there should be, naturally, mediation’ (*Vermittlung muss natürlich stattfinden*) (MEW 42 1983: 104; Marx 1974: 88–89). More precisely, there are two mediations: that of the market (ex post), production for exchange (*durch den Austausch der Waren*), and that of the organization (ex ante), *die Organisation*. In *Capital*, Volume I chapter 12 (particularly in point 4), he analyzes the nature of this double mediations—that of the *organization* within the firms and that of the *market* between them. Within firms, the coordination is not carried out by a posteriori equilibrium according to supply and demand, but by an *organization* that articulates a priori ends with means and means with ends. Marx’s purpose is to show how, in the dialectical interrelation between technological development and class struggle, the second mediation must prevail over the first. The ultimate result will be the socialist revolution. We know what actually happened.... Therefore, we must reconsider the theoretical approach that underlies Marx’s exposition. What is not really coherent here is to attribute both logical-structural and historical priority to the market, to consider the *organization* as a pure historical phenomenon which emerges within the capitalist *market* structure, and finally to expect that the former will, in due time, blow up the latter and replace it. We therefore doubt if this historicist arrangement of the two mediations is theoretically legitimate and historically acceptable.

The Fetishism of Organization

It should not be surprising that there is, correspondingly, a fetishism of organization. What Marx, in his manuscript ‘Chapter VI’, often referred to as ‘The Unpublished Chapter of *Capital*’, defines as the ‘real subsumption of labor to capital’ that appears in manufactures and flourishes in industrial firms, should more exactly be analyzed as a subsumption to

organization, that is, as the abandonment of our *other* capacity of 'coordination on a social scale' in the hands of the managerial power without which the capitalist property-power (the market's power: power to purchase, to hire, to lay off, to sell, to borrow, to relocate, etc.) cannot be exercised—even if the manager and the proprietor can possibly be the same person. In both cases of market and organization, fetishism is to be understood as a fetishization *process*. According to the biblical paradigm of the golden calf, we are humbly bowing before an idol we have made with our own hands: before a social force that we have produced by making it the arbiter of the social order: a 'forgotten' decision repressed by the social unconsciousness, which makes us consider it a natural order. Just as the market does, the organization implies its own content of *rational* abstraction. Given which, within the firm, use value can only appear as the result of an organizational arrangement of different kinds of concrete labors (as it was the case in the construction of the Egyptian pyramids and the Chinese Wall long before the market existed). We make our two capacities of rational coordination (and, therefore, abstraction) represented by the market and the organization, idols to which we subject ourselves. This double process of fetishization corresponds, as we have seen, to Level 2 where the specific mechanisms of capitalism are not yet supposed. It includes the organization to the same extent as the market. To be correct, the theoretical exposition (which defines the theory) should locate these two concepts at the same initial position L2.⁹ For the theory of the 'bourgeois' or 'modern' society announced by Marx in his preface, to be really coherent, it must include these two poles from the very beginning. It can only be properly exposed by a discourse that starts with the articulation between these two mediations. That is what Marx, in my opinion, did not really understand. And this results in a myriad of consequences (a topic which exceeds the limits of this chapter) because these two *relations of production* constitute two modes of real abstraction conflicting with each other within the same *mode of production*.

The True Nature of the 'Inaugural Act'

Here, I leave aside the *historical* dimension¹⁰ of Marx's presentation and focus on the coherence of his *structural* exposition. It is well known that the theoretical object Marx considers in *Capital* is the 'edifice' whose economic 'infrastructure' is linked to its juridical and political 'superstructure', that is, in modern nation-states, as we can see in the chapter on the

working day and the struggle for its limitation through *national legislations*. For Marx, writing *Capital* was the first stage of a larger investigation into the world as a whole. Such a comprehensive project that exceeded his strength was later resumed in the theories of the World-system which emphasize its immanent ‘coloniality’. Now, in the nation-state form of *modern* society that Marx takes as a reference, *the organization is as ‘meta-structuring’ and ‘structuring’ as the market*. If this is the case, for the exposition to be in accordance with its object, it should be stated in the first section: within the metastructural ‘prologue’ L2 of the structural exposition L3. In fact, why would not these modern producers, considered at the market L2 where they are supposed to relate to each other as free, equal and rational humans (according to the modern ‘popular prejudice’, *Volksvorurteil*, of an equality that, as Marx highlights, was unimaginable for Aristotle in the times of slavery) (MEW 23 1962: 74), be able to decide *to limit* the reign of the market by commonly decided regulations? Therefore, what is missing in the ‘logical’ development of the exposition is a correct start based on the *initial coexistence* of market and organization in the metastructure itself and consequently in the structure of this form of society. That is the point we have now to consider. As we will see, such is the ontological context of the real abstractions, of the contradictions and struggles they arouse.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF REAL ABSTRACTION AND THE STRUGGLE FOR OVERCOMING THEM

Class Struggle: Concreteness Versus Abstraction

Real abstractions correspond to real contradictions. But these do not take place between *use value* and *value* as the esoteric current claims. In fact, these elements are not *contradictory*: they do not form a contradiction (*Widerspruch*). This term was ostensibly present in the first version of *Capital*, but Marx erased it in the second (Marx 1980: 44). *Use value* and *value* are counterparts (*Gegenteile*), complementary factors (*Faktoren*), whose relation constitutes, as we have seen, the *rationality* of market production. The essential contradiction inherent to capitalism is the one between *use value* and *surplus value*, because, in fact, the logic of surplus value, that of abstract wealth, makes the capitalist dismiss and despise use value as such. This contradiction opposes capitalists and workers and, also,

the rest of the population (whose vital interests does not interest capital). In addition to an economic contradiction (any reduction of salary resulting in an increase in surplus value), there is a *vital contradiction* that leads to the maximum possible consumption of the labor force and to the degradation of all economic, social, cultural and political conditions of human life. On the other hand, this contradiction has a positive side as a *productive contradiction*. Capitalists, who are only interested in abstract wealth, that of surplus value, can only accumulate it through producing some concrete commodity that must have a use value, at least for some people, even if for a nefarious social use, such as in the production of weapons of mass destruction. Anyway, as such, the requirement of a use value paves the way for a *political contradiction*. Actually, for producing commodities, coercion is not enough: a certain consent of the producer-consumer is required. More precisely, people, as collective producer-consumer, have some social power and show historically the ability, particularly in the context of nation-states, to determine the nature of material and cultural objects to be produced, such as schools, hospitals, housing, public transport and so on. One cannot, indeed, derive all these concreteness of use values from 'capital' as such, that is, from projects or mechanisms that would belong to it. When capital has an opportunity in colonies, it imposes slavery, keeping native or imported workers in the state of foreigners. On the contrary, in the context of nation-states, the people from below make the 'real abstraction' *recede* as they unite in class struggles. *Class struggles produce 'real concreteness' in opposition to real abstraction*. The speculative focus of the esoteric theorists on the thematic of 'real abstraction' corresponds to a pathetic rhetoric by which the philosopher, abandoning the hope of being recognized as a king, disguises himself as a prophet. Such a posture means nothing else but the reversal of historicism into resignation. Thus, for Moishe Postone, the mobilizations of unions, feminism and other movements are nothing more than 'expressions of the system'. The same condescendence can be found in Anselm Jappe.¹¹ Yet we should not ignore, among other things, the fact that the *only* social forces, which have proved historically committed against productivism, are those of the worker's movements that fought incessantly for the 8-hour workday, the 40-hour week, the 35-hour week, now 32, retirement at the age of 60 years and so on. With the motto, 'We work too much! Enough! Life is not for producing, but for living!'. Limiting production is saving the planet.

To better understand this class confrontation, we have to go back to the theoretical abstraction of L2, that of mediations and the 'immediacy' they

imply: to the potential of discursive cooperation. What is the legitimate ‘beginning’ among free and equal human beings, toward which every conflict leads them back? Isn’t it the use of deliberation that decides what could be given to the ‘*immediate*’ discursive cooperation and what, due to its complexity, should be managed (under the control of discourse in common, supposedly freely and equally) by *mediation* of either organization or market? Here, we can turn to Talcott Parsons’ well-known perspective: it is impossible for human beings to regulate the whole complexity of the social order by discursive collaboration. In Marx’s words, ‘Mediations are necessary’. Parsons uses the term ‘media’. For Habermas and his disciples in this regard, they are the market and the organization. Not surprisingly. His only mistake is to assign the market to economy and the organization to administration and politics. In a sense, and in spite of these various distortions, we are here in the wake of Marx. Parsons’ analysis reveals, below the coordination by the two *media*, the ‘immediacy’ of which they are the supposed extension: the discursive exchange of *immediate* cooperation. In this sense, ‘in the beginning was the word’. But, as soon as ‘the word’ (language, discourse) is not enough to bring order to the complexity of social existence, abstraction devices are necessary: market and organization. Market prices spare us infinite negotiations, and, likewise, the Highway Code (all kinds of rules, norms, etc.) prevents unnecessary arguments. As for the *supposedly* shared discourse, that of politics, it will focus, for a good part, on what will be assigned, respectively, to the market and to the organization. This metastructural configuration is not the *foundation* of the modern order, but its *fictional reference*, its declared and instrumentalized assumption.

In effect, modernity must not be understood as the *triumph of reason*, but as the manifestation of its constant inversion. The metastructural approach reinterprets the Frankfurt School’s theme of ‘instrumental reason’. I propose a quite different approach, analyzing modernity as the *instrumentalization of reason*, as a conversion, the reversal of these two *rational mediations* into a primary pair of *class factors*. This ‘metastructuration’ is the basis for a split within a dominant class between a property-power that dominates the market and a competency power that dominates the organization. The dominant class therefore has two ‘poles’ that refer to two quite different class powers, two closely intertwined but partially separable powers. Both converging and diverging are not exercised or reproduced in the same way. Facing this dominant class, made of those privileged with property in the market or with competency in the

organization, the bottom class, which I call the 'fundamental class' or the 'popular class', is composed of those who do not have any property or competency privilege. This does not mean that they do not have knowledge (their knowledge can be as ample as or more than the knowledge of those called 'competent', but they are not included in a competent *authority*) or power. They have a collective social potency, a potential to hold on a power that simply aims to accumulate and govern, regardless of the interests of concrete life. We saw above how this pair of 'productive'/'political' contradictions open the way for the rise of the fundamental class. We must now show that, in this regard, the fundamental class has a different relation to these two dominations.¹²

*The Meta/Structural Concept of the 'Triangular Duel'
and the Question of Popular Hegemony*

Competency power within the organization is, in fact, less 'abstract' than property-power in the market. The power in the market is exercised by the silent mechanisms of competition (which are not counterbalanced—quite the opposite—by the discourse of advertisement, unilateral and competitive by itself). By contrast, the competency power can only be exercised by communicating itself at least to some extent, by providing explanation or justification. The fundamental class, therefore, has more hold on competency power. This explains that modern class struggle is always, at the same time, a *dual*—fundamental class against dominant class—and a *triangular* one because this dominant class includes two poles with which the fundamental class maintains an unequal antagonism. The perspective from below is to break the dominant class, to dissociate its two sides, to divide it in order to defeat it. This requires that class struggle be as intense against the competent pole, but with an 'hegemonic' perspective in the Gramscian sense, aiming to mobilize some of its strata and fractions against the capital-power; and this popular hegemony is possible only if the fundamental class shows the most powerful and is able to gather all its constituent parts, particularly those most exploited, usually excluded from the political sphere. This extensive topic, which is the horizon of the debate about the 'real abstraction', implies different registers. For good (meta-structural) reasons—albeit actually for the best and for the worst—the Marxist tradition distinguishes two of them.

Let us designate the first register as that of 'socialism'. The people from below can only fight against the real abstraction of the capitalist *market*,

that of surplus value, by opposing it *organization*: by demanding that the social institutions be structured according to a common organization and not in a market form. That includes large fields of education, health, scientific research, public safety, urbanism, social services and a comprehensive list would include, in the current conditions, wide sectors of material and digital production. At the same time, it is necessary to fight against market or pseudo-market relations not to replace the organized form within large companies or large administrations, as it is more and more the case.

The second register, as immediately required as the first on our agenda, is ‘communism’, often called ‘the common’ (‘le commun’) or given other names. We can nowadays perceive its presence in many experiences and utopias. What is now on the agenda is to defeat both the dictatorship of the capitalists and that of the competent: to go beyond market and organization toward *cooperation* between free and equal human beings. Only this kind of grassroots cooperative practice of production can forge a collaborative consciousness able to intervene at the highest levels of the social edifice.

This second register, communism, is that of democracy. The challenge is, in fact, to master the market by means of the organization and to master the organization by means of unmediated discourse, equally exchanged among all. This means a democratic struggle against the dominants of both types by imposing to the masters of the market and of the organization what they are opposed to in a myriad of ways: a government based on free and equal discursive exchange at every level.

The situation may seem desperate, as capital-power seems to have absorbed competency power (and, concurrently, as the right seems to have absorbed the ‘left’, a question that I am not addressing here¹³). A nation-state has been the crucible for some kind of encounter, within the project of a ‘social state’, between the common people and the competent, albeit within a narrowly *national* horizon. Under neoliberalism, it suffered a deep degradation which resulted in the competent pole being completely hegemonized by the capital pole. Yet we cannot see that other strategic principles would be more conceivable than that of such a ‘popular hegemony’. It remains only to be seen how to implement it in today’s world, reunited and re-divided by the digital technology, where a nation-state has become factually problematic. But we have no reason to think that neoliberalism is the end of history because the ‘metastructuration’ structures

modern society as radically as before, under the sign of an interpellation to emancipation, on a never-wider scale.

At the end of this exposition, the most crucial issue remains that of the *ecological abstraction*. Marx demonstrates that the ultimate aim of capital is nothing else but this abstract wealth: surplus value. Thus, Marx must be recognized as the founder of a political ecology. He reveals the true nature of this abstraction: its indifference toward the consequences for humankind and nature. Ecological disaster is the culmination of real abstraction. Humankind can confront it only by engaging in all of its intellectual resources, those of the various natural and social sciences. And that should be the commitment of all, every minute of every day... Marxist knowledge, which refers to historical materialism, can really contribute only under the condition of being consistent in itself and clearly conscious of the scope and limits of its concepts. Let us remember what Marx wrote to his translator, Joseph Roy, on March 18, 1872, 'There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits' (Marx 1872: 7).

This article was translated by Andrés Pacheco and Renata Fariás.

NOTES

1. See Anselm Jappe: 'It is necessary to assume the difference between the 'exoteric' and the 'esoteric' Marx, between the conceptual core and the historical development, between the essence and the phenomenon' (Jappe 2017a: Kindle position 5589). Here, I also refer to his main book (Jappe 2017b).
2. This current has affinities with the *New Dialectic*, whose interpretation about Hegel's *Logic* is still better connected with the main Marxist traditions. See the critique I formulated some time ago in Bidet (2005) of Christopher Arthur (2004).
3. In a decisive text at the end of Chapter 5, Marx mentions, respectively, the 'production process' (L1), the 'commodity production process' (L2) and the 'capitalist production process' (L3): 'Als Einheit von Arbeitsprozess und Wertbildung ist der Produktionsprozess von Waren, als Einheit von Arbeitsprozess und Verwertungsprozess ist er kapitalistischer Produktionsprozess, kapitalistische Form von Warenproduktion' (MEW 23 1962: 211).
4. He only addresses this point marginally; for instance, in the paragraph entitled *Arbeitsprozess* (MEW 23 1962: 192–199). See also the passage about Robinson, taken as the producer in general.

5. If Marx does not insist on this point in *Capital*, it is without a doubt because he thought it was self-evident. We can see the irony directed at those who did not understand this simple idea. Thus, in *Notes on Wagner* (MEW 19 1987: 375–376), he emphasizes that ‘the “value” of the commodity only expresses, in an evolved historical form, what exists in the same way, but under different appearance, in all other historical social forms; this is, the social character of labour, to the extent to which labour exists as an expenditure of “social” labour power. (...) therefore, the “value” of the commodity is, simply, a specific form of something that exists in all societal forms’. To sum up, the pair consisting of concrete labor/abstract labor (as expenditure) is common to all forms of society.
6. It is advisable to interpret properly Marx’s wording at the end of Part 2 of Volume 1: we now abandon ‘the sphere of circulation of commodities’ where freedom and equality reign and we enter ‘the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there stares us in the face *No admittance except on business*’. That does not mean that we move from the domain of *circulation* which would have been the topic since the beginning of *Capital* up to this point, to the domain of *production* which will be considered in Part 3. *Market circulation* as mentioned here at the end of this analysis of L2, is just a counterpart to *market production* (as such, as the most abstract level of capitalist production) that opens Part 1 as we have seen. The esoteric interpretation ignores, among others, that important point.
7. For a long time, Marx tried to proceed from one to the other, from the ‘value form’ to the ‘surplus value form’, by means of a categorial exposition. He eventually gave up: it is not possible to proceed *dialectically* from a purely market ‘C-M-C form’ to a capitalist ‘M-C-M form’ because it simply would not make sense. In *Capital*, the ‘transformation’, *Verwandlung*, of money into capital (i.e. of a market relation into a capitalist relation, of the market abstraction into the capitalist abstraction) is produced not by the critique of a ‘form’, but of the (vulgar) ‘formula’ of capital as money that is capable of producing more money. This *analytic* path does not produce a dialectical *move* from one to the other as previous versions of this exposition attempted to achieve, but a *gap* between two levels of reality, that is, between two levels of the theoretical abstraction, of which the second represents a regime of real abstraction specific to the capitalist mode of production. This is the hypothesis that I develop in my book published in Bidet (1985), see Bidet (2007a: 153–163). I believe that it is now an accepted hypothesis. See also Bidet (2004: 101–102, 2010: 112–113).
8. Here, the French version Marx (1993: 90–91), as ‘reviewed by Marx’, is more explicit than the German original text (MEW 23 1962: 92–94). Nonetheless, the idea is the same.

9. This is the supposedly more 'adequate' exposition I attempted in Bidet (2004), translated into Italian, Spanish, Chinese and Portuguese (Spanish translation: Bidet 2007b) but not into English.
10. 'Capitalism' does not begin only by the market. It begins equally, as it is well known, by the 'original accumulation' and by several organized processes at the state or economic levels. More importantly, it emerges from a social context in which the market and the organization are combined. The question of this beginning is the subject of Chapter 7 of Bidet (2011) available in CAIRN Info. The 'logical development' of the exposition must not be expected to follow a course parallel to the 'historical' development: it is simply supposed to help us to understand it.
11. 'The historical role of the workers' movements consisted of, above all, beyond its proclaimed intentions, promoting the integration of the proletariat' (Jappe 2017a: Kindle position 5615).
12. If this holds true, the theoretical presentation must begin with an analysis of this meta/structural configuration of modern nation-states; and this is the first stage toward a theory of the world-system and of the 'coloniality' inherent to modernity. We must observe that modernity, understood in this way, emerges at the same epoch in China and in Europe, as some European and Chinese medievalists point out (see the Kyoto School), much before the age of industrial capitalism. The metastructural approach, embedded in the Marxian perspective of a theory of modernity as a global phenomenon, is to be understood as a site open to all the social sciences (economics, law, sociology, history, psychopathology, etc.). As what is at stake is the instrumentalization of 'reason' in its double sense of *Verstand* and *Vernunft*, and class struggle as immanent to their interrelations, philosophy must always feel here at home. Such an argument, of course, cannot be comprehensively developed in the space of a short article.
13. This is the topic of my last book (Bidet 2018) *"Eux" et "Nous"? Une politique à l'usage du peuple*, Paris, Kimé, 2018.

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On Real Objects That Are Not Sensuous: Marx and Abstraction *in actu*

Maurício Vieira Martins

What holds up the bird is the branch and not the laws of elasticity. If we reduce the branch to the laws of elasticity, we must no longer speak of a bird but of colloidal solutions. At such a level of analytical abstraction, it is no longer a question of environment for a living being, nor of health nor of disease. Similarly, what the fox eats is the hen's egg and not the chemistry of albuminoids or the laws of embryology (Canguilhem 1978: 159).

In his controversy with the biologists who divested the phenomenon of life of its sensuous characteristics, philosopher Georges Canguilhem saw himself forced to evoke, in quite visual terms, how important a phenomenology of the real world is. Our take is, at least at first, in agreement with Canguilhem: What the fox eats is in fact a hen's egg, and not the chemistry of albuminoids, and what holds the birds up is, glaringly, the tree branch. And yet the question remains: Is there in the history of thought a supplementary way to approach this thematic field, a way that preserves the integrity of the sensuous world but also manages to demonstrate the strength of the underlying relations that organize it?

We believe there is. Marx's career illustrates particularly clearly the path of a thinker who, in his first works, aimed to deal exclusively with the

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analysis of the sensuous world but progressively evolved toward acknowledging the casual force of relations that cannot be grasped through the senses. We posit that the topic of *real abstraction*¹ in Marx—the general aim of this volume—can be better understood within this context.

It would exceed the scope of this brief chapter to trace the different stages in Marx's thought on this topic up to the position he enunciated in his maturity (here analyzed). However, a characteristic of *The German Ideology*—young Marx and Engels' seminal work—should be briefly mentioned, if only for the sake of contrast. Despite this work's richness, in it the reader will find a series of ideas that show a strong reliance on empirical reality to support what they there call real knowledge (to be gained in spite of the deceptions of the neo-Hegelian school). In fact, a recurrent reason for the controversy with B. Bauer, M. Stirner and D. Strauss is their difficulty in dealing with the harshness that characterizes the real world. Marx and Engels write that, fascinated by philosophical abstractions, the young Hegelians trapped themselves in a closed circuit that refracted real verification. Therefore, the recurrent statements in *The German Ideology* that combat such position: 'These premises can be thus verified in a purely empirical way'; 'Empirical observation must in each separate instance bring out empirically, and without any mystification, the connection of the social and political structure with production'; and '...every profound philosophical problem is resolved, (...) quite simply into an empirical fact' (Marx and Engels 1981: 22–28). This is the predominant tone of the harsh controversy among the German idealists in the mid-40s.

The progress of Marx's studies on economic politics nuanced the position he had taken as regards the role of abstractions in understanding reality. More precisely, discovering value as a hidden reality (though not a metaphysical one) that allows establishing equivalences between sensuously different objects made his youthful approach more complex. Although we may not endorse Althusser's thesis of an epistemological rupture within Marx's work—a problematic thesis that empties the texts written in his youth of their undeniable productivity—there is shift of emphasis that must not be overlooked. If in *The German Ideology* the references to philosophical abstractions are, with rare exception, negative—envisioned almost like a deceiving veil standing between the researcher and reality—in Marx's maturity such a perspective was modified. In the first *Preface to The Capital*, on the other hand, there is an explicit valorization of the ability to abstract: 'In the analysis of economic forms, neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of use. The force of abstraction

must replace both. In bourgeois society, the commodity-form of the product of labor, or the value-form of the commodity, is the economic cell-form' (Marx 1996: 130).

Here, the ability to abstract is, instead of associated to a sign of error, accepted as the proper manner in which thinking proceeds, piercing through the immediate appearance of phenomena toward their most essential structure. Confirming such assessment, the first chapter of *The Capital* starts with an analysis of commodity, object that appears to the senses, but as the analysis progresses it evidences first the exchange-value of commodities, then value and finally abstract labor as the substance of value. As a synthesis of this first abstract proceeding, there is the now classic formula: 'Let's consider now the residue of each of these labor products. It consists of the same unsubstantial reality in each, a mere congelation of homogeneous human labor' (idem: 168).

Marx delves deeper into the particulars of this unsubstantial reality—which, not being a metaphysical object, is first and foremost a product of a certain kind of labor—as conditions for the understanding of the frame of capitalist society. However, it was not only in *The Capital* that Marx explicitly pronounced an affirmative relation with the abstract proceeding. Back in the 1950s, there was a passage in *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* that, although not explicitly using the category of real abstraction, persuasively shows its coherence with Marx's thought. In reference to the equating of commodities to the labor-time that produces them, Marx states:

To measure the exchange-value of commodities by the labor-time they contain, the different kinds of labor have to be reduced to uniform, homogeneous, simple labor, in short to labor of uniform quality, whose only difference, therefore, is quantity.

This reduction appears to be abstraction, but it is an abstraction which is made every day in the social process of production. (...) This abstraction, human labor in general, exists in the form of average labor which, in a given society, the average person can perform (...). (Marx 2008: 55–56)

The passage is crucial: *Abstraction exists*. That is to say, the reduction of all commodities to labor-time is not only a product of thought but also takes place within society itself. Marx unveils a process of abstraction (in the core sense of reduction) at work in the real proper, even though this statement is at odds with common sense, as well as with an old philosophi-

cal tradition. In the case here illustrated, the operation of abstraction done by thought is the counterpart of a real process. Therefore, there is a modification in the antinomy opposing the so-called real object to the object of knowledge (the former understood as an empirical thing only, the latter as a thing of thought only). This is an intertwining of the so-called cognitive process with the most basilar determinations of commercial production, responsible for the emergence of the real abstraction.²

Once the real basis of this abstraction is acknowledged (it can be called an ontological basis), there is a qualification of the greatest importance to be made. It is the truth or falsehood tenor that a research manages to attain. As regards scientific activity, and Marx not being a relativist, he continuously wonders at the criterion that allows to determine the truth value of a group of theoretical propositions. Getting to the point: There is a true, productive scientific abstraction, as well as there is a wrong one, that wanders away from what it sought to explain. While the former manages to shed light on the causal mechanisms underlying the phenomenon in focus, the latter is content with its most partial and peripheral aspects. A very clear distinction is found in a passage of *Theories of Surplus Value*, in which Marx disagrees with a recurrent critique to David Ricardo, as the British economist was accused of being too abstract. In response, Marx inverts the terms of the matter in one of his most antiempiricist statements:

Ricardo commits all these blunders, because he attempts to carry through his identification of the rate of surplus-value with the rate of profit by means of forced abstractions. The vulgar mob has therefore concluded that theoretical truths are abstractions which are at variance with reality, instead of seeing, on the contrary, that Ricardo does not carry true abstract thinking far enough and is therefore driven into false abstraction. (Marx 1968: 437)

The difference with *The German Ideology* is almost palpable. As we have seen, in this text the neo-Hegelians were criticized for their excessively abstract analyses, and ‘every profound philosophical problem is resolved, (...) quite simply into an empirical fact’ (Marx and Engels 1981: 34). Already in *Theories of Surplus Value* there is a different conceptual outlook, in which Ricardo had not taken true abstract thinking far enough to grant him the understanding of the phenomenon at hand. It can be also noticed that in his maturity Marx particularly emphasized a conception of reality stratified into different levels: The first of them can be accessed through the senses, but it is not the only one or the most determining.

Because it overcomes the old dichotomy opposing inductive procedures to deductive procedures, some commentarists called the method adopted in the texts of Marx's maturity (Archer et al. 1998) a retroduction. In it, the starting point is an apparent reality, analyzed until we arrive at its subterranean causal mechanism, which is not apprehended by the senses, but is, nevertheless, responsible for the empirical configuration that appears before us. There are various examples in Marx's work: Commodities covering the labor-time needed for their production: the salary—sensuous reality—hiding the surplus value; the population—itself data apparent to the senses—as the apparent form assumed by the social classes that structure it; and so on.

* * *

In analyzing this rational working in the real proper as a real abstraction (and at times as a separation also), it is necessary to clarify that the awareness of its existence comes to us only a posteriori. Marx writes in *The Capital* that he passing of the centuries in the history of humanity was necessary to decipher the value-form. In the case of commercial production it expanded in extension and density, and the homogenization of the different kinds of human labor, real basis for abstract labor, started to be fully valid. The second reason is linked with a basic Marxist supposition, which states that the analysis categories are not a priori constructions but 'forms of being, the characteristics of existence' (Marx 2011: 59).³ For thinkers to formulate certain categories, these should have some counterpart in the real being, even a seminal one. When Marx analyzed a fragment of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*—Marx was very fond of Aristotle—he dealt with the reason why the Greek philosopher did not manage to decipher the form of the value. Instead of a subjective limit in Aristotle, what is found in a first layer of analysis is the inherent limits of Greek society (based on slave labor), in which the concept of human equality was non-existent, which in turn made the scientific deciphering of value impossible (Marx 1996: 186–187).

Marx's comment on Aristotle's limit brings forward wider issues about the historic discontinuity in the fully developed value system. Its emergence can be compared to a new object in the world (Maar 2016), in a wide sense, a group of relations that establishes a new logic for sociability. The discontinuity should be emphasized, bearing in mind that still today in various academic spheres it is said that the fundamental topics for phi-

losophy were already present in classical philosophy—although developed in later centuries. From the elements already developed in this chapter, it is evident that such statement demands rectifying. *A theory of value is a wide theoretic field⁴—with implication in different areas of human knowledge—that only centuries after the Greeks could be properly developed.* Only when the *whole* social life was subordinated to the production of goods could such a theoretical development be possible.

This debate becomes more complex as we notice that, as the labor power entered the productive circuit, there came capitalist merchant production, the most advanced moment of a merchantilization already present at the beginnings of the bourgeois society. It is undeniable that the entrance of the labor power in the trading circuits changed the meaning of production as a whole—it becomes more and more expansive: ‘... by incorporating living labor with their dead substance, the capitalist at the same time converts value, i.e., past, materialized, and dead labor into capital, into value big with value, a live monster that is fruitful and multiplies’ (Marx 1996: 312).

Marx insists: The expansive quality of the capital is precisely the continuous incorporation of the living labor power into its objectivity. However, this incorporation takes place at a specific time and place: a series of historical presuppositions are necessary, such as the generalized monetization of the economy, which must be articulated with the expropriation of the small independent producer. It follows that minimizing how important the arc of history is in political economy (arguing that what matters is only deducing the logical categories) is a procedure alien to Marx himself, who emphasizes the historical marks of the process: ‘The conversion of money, which is itself only a converted form of the commodity, into capital only takes place once labor capacity has been converted into a commodity for the worker himself; hence once the category of commodity trade has taken control of a sphere which was previously excluded from it, or only sporadically included in it’ (Marx 1975: 124).

This explicit reference to certain historical processes—which will later be undertaken by the capitalist accumulation proper—opens an opportunity to digress slightly in the argument and tackle the tenor of Marx’s relationship with his sources. Scholars frequently notice Marx’s progressively growing apart from Feuerbach as he incorporated certain topics from Hegel’s *Science of Logic*. On the one hand, we understand this is so and it highlights the aspects of Hegel’s work valued by Marx. On the other hand, it was decided not to follow this path in the present chapter.

This is so because Marx hugely inverted the categories of political economy, which we believe render only partially true the suggestion that Marx ‘applied’ Hegel’s logic in economic matters. Furthermore, Marx reformulated Hegel’s issues so profoundly that it raises Marx to a different theoretical level—from himself, authorial, in the strong sense of the word—that, even if indebted with his sources, is better visualized within the new horizon he himself opened.

Retaking the thread of our exposition, we would say that we should avoid the frequent mistake that many make in assuming that the nucleus of Marx’s argument on the expansion of value can be found only in the first three chapters of *The Capital* (which analyze the commodity, the exchange process and money). Although these memorable chapters already present the structural determinations of the mercantile society, the analysis must move on to properly make room for the aforementioned impact of the entrance of the labor power as a commodity in the capitalist circuit. For the topic we are focusing on here, it is interesting to highlight the dynamic (not static) quality of the value as abstraction in actu: ‘Those who regard the gaining by value of independent existence as a mere abstraction forget that the movement of industrial capital is this abstraction in actu’ (Marx 1983: 78).

Well, if the movement of the industrial capital is the abstraction in actu, it soon becomes evident that the latter *generates effects in reality, it is causally powerful*. Once again, the antiempiricist quality of Marx’s position is extremely clear; bear in mind that even today it is reproduced as common sense the notion that only ‘concrete facts’ can generate other concrete facts, and so ignoring the possibility of abstract processes (which, in the specific sense we here give evidence of) also generates uninterrupted effects on reality. Toward the end of his life, György Lukács stressed properly this phenomenon: ‘In the nineteenth century, millions of independent artisans experienced the effects of this abstraction of socially necessary labour as their own ruin, i.e. they experienced in practice the concrete consequences, without having any suspicion that what they were facing was an achieved abstraction of the social process; this abstraction has the same ontological rigour of facticity as a car that runs you over’ (Lukács 2012: 315).

Let us remember that the time of socially necessary labor is connected to the level of automatization that the economy has reached and with competition between the different capitalists to progressively achieve it: an additional factor to the effects of the aforementioned artisan’s ruin. ‘Silent

co-action' of the economic relations, as Marx puts it, the abstraction in actu constrains the social life as a whole.

* * *

In a well-known passage, economist Andrew Kliman stated that 'What controls the world economy is not the IMF or the WB or the US Treasury or Wall Street. What controls the capitalist world economy is rather an impersonal law, the law of value' (Kliman 2000/2001). It is a retroductive postulate, we could say, that goes beyond the concrete institutions (the World Bank, the IMF, etc.) to point to the non-sensory regularity that determines them. If we compare Kilman's argument with G. Canguilhem quoted at the beginning of this chapter (that states that what holds up the bird is the branch and not the laws of elasticity), we may reach the conclusion that they are practically antithetic. The French philosopher values the sensory world as the most genuine manifestation of an ontology, whereas Kliman chooses to emphasize the impersonal relations underlying this world.

In consequence, we posit that what was unique in Marx's position was promoting a very intimate fusion of theoretical approaches that usually appear to oppose one another in a debate. *The Capital* is still a work of great explicative force because it manages to concretize the enunciated 'synthesis of multiple determinations.' Throughout the text, the most abstract category determinations—characteristic of the value law—are addressed as intimately linked to the historic experience of men and women; it is shockingly exposed, for example, in the chapters about 'The Working day', or 'Machinery and Modern Industry'.

However, in making these considerations, we do not seek to equalize the causal force of these different determinations. If we were asked which group of relations ultimately has greater causal force, our answer would point to the 'value that valorizes itself,' a regularity that is not immediately perceived through the senses. It is the predominant moment of this causal complex. And, on a personal note, as a researcher of Latin America, I understand that the aforementioned predominance explains why we frequently wonder at the similarities we find when studying historical processes in different countries of the region. If we take recent examples, the concrete characters at play in each country are different: Michel Temer in Brazil, Mauricio Macri in Argentina, Pedro Kuczynski in Peru, and so on. But the researcher with a Marxist conceptual background will soon see

that behind these singular historical figures, there are connections that repeat periodically: their direct or indirect links to big international capital; the successive plans of fiscal conservatism; the most vulnerable social groups as their preferred target; and so on. Needless to say, such structural marks repeat throughout the world: even countries previously preserved from the voracity of the capital find themselves involved in the diktat of the capitalist mercantile logic, concrete commands that flesh out what Marx called the value law, an abstraction in actu that generates devastating effects in our lives.

On the other hand, it is necessary to realize that what is called the Marxist school has sometimes had difficulty in maintaining the dialectic unit of its founder. *In the reception of his work, it is frequently verified that there is a rift between the different but interconnected approaches mentioned before.* To be more explicit: what for Marx was a taut articulation between the systematic plan of analysis (at the highest level of abstraction) and the historical approach (that points to the unavoidable presence of the social classes and their conflict) became an antinomy in some of his followers. So we find on the one hand a Marx for the economists and philosophers, who barely concerned with the lineament of the most general structures: when this happens, the validity of the value law becomes a fantasy almost, alienated from historicity and the growing social violence (a risk that, because of what was presented above, must, of course, be avoided at all costs). On the other hand, there are researchers more talented in historical research, who reconstruct with precision the different temporal and spatial facets in which the concrete processes develop, but sometimes giving less importance to those more abstract recursions, entwined in the richness of the historical experience.

Having acknowledged this, we should immediately add that, while at the level of concepts it is necessary to be clear as to the causal power of the value law, of course the concrete political struggle focuses on a very real group. One doesn't struggle against imperialism in the abstract, for instance, but against its most direct representatives and, above all, against the policies of expropriation that they put forward, knowing also that, if eventually one of these representatives disappear, almost immediately another arises in an equivalent place, due to the reasons mentioned. This taut articulation between the core category determinations is what must be faced in each concrete junction.

In a wider philosophical level, we would say that the topic of abstraction in actu in Marx leads to a much more complex understanding of real-

ity, which rejects its identification with the merely sensuous order. In his own field of research during his maturity—political economy—Marx managed to overcome the dichotomy that opposed real to metaphysical objects, a dichotomy that goes back to Plato. The relevance of this procedure is evident: it discerns progressively stratified levels of a real that it is not exhausted in its appearance. This procedure allows the connection of Marxism and other fields of knowledge, even the so-called natural sciences (such as physics, chemistry, etc.), which have long freed themselves from the prison of the empiricist vision of the world. Against the proud praise of the fragment as an end in itself (praise to be found in some postmodern authors is the clearest example), there is a progress toward a more complex vision of the world in which we live in, to be found in the assumption of the real abstraction and the abstraction *in actu*. In the level of political action, some projects are left in check: those projects that imply it is possible to transform the capitalist society by altering its most immediate effects, such as the concentration of income, for example, through programs of wealth distribution—praiseworthy in themselves, but with evident limitations. What truly begs transforming, through organized political action, is the inherent logic of the value law and its deleterious effects; otherwise, we will forever be dealing with consequences, without reaching the underlying mechanisms that produce them.

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NOTES

1. Specialists argue whether it is possible to locate in Marx's lengthy work (which hasn't been published in full) the term *real abstraction*. It seems it is not the case. Having said that, throughout this chapter, we quote passages from the author that show that this category is coherent with Marx's thought. To historically reconstruct the debate—A. Sohn-Rethel's importance, the subsequent repercussion, and so on—the following papers can be consulted: A. Toscano (2008) and H. Reichelt (2007). We chose to also include in this chapter the category of abstraction *in actu*—with emphasis in its dynamic aspect—to be found in the second volume of *The Capital*.
2. However, it is not affirmed that all abstractions made by human thinking are analogous to the one here examined. That would be an overgeneralization,

taking into account the obvious ascertainment that a cognitive theory involves several other determinations present in conceptual thinking (which are the legitimate object of other disciplines). The aim here is, through the trail left by Marx, to evidence the correspondence between the capitalist commercial production and the aforementioned abstraction process, which political economy brought about, for example, elaborating the category of *general labor*.

3. I have dealt more thoroughly with the categories immanently belonging to the real in my paper, Martins (2017).
4. In contrast to Antonio Negri, who claimed that Marx's value theory had expired, a more recent, extensive bibliography shows how indispensable such theory is to understand the economic processes that we are living in the twentieth century. On the fragility of Negri's position, see the dossier with the work of authors from various countries organized by H. Amorim (2014).

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The Concept of Form in the Critique of Political Economy

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In this chapter we will try to precise the meaning that holds the concept of *form* within the Marxian critique of political economy and, so far as *real abstraction* is an attribute of the form, contribute in that way to the task that summons us in this volume. Given the fact that every contemporary reading of classical texts, like Marx's critique of political economy, is mediated by some subsequent reading, we will avoid the naive presumption of recovering a supposedly original and authentic meaning in these texts. Therefore, we confess beforehand that we read Marx's critique of political economy from the *Critical Theory* perspective and, more specifically, in the way it was assimilated within the so called *Open Marxism*. The concept of form is, from this perspective, a key concept to the critique of capitalist social relations. But it is also a very complex concept. The efforts trying to precise its meaning in these few pages will force us, in consequence, to adopt an epigrammatic style.

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1. Marx repeatedly employs the term ‘form’ (*Form*) in his writings about the critique of political economy, although not in a univocal way (see García Vela 2015). Let us just consider the first chapter of his *Capital*. The term already appears in the first sentence: ‘The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities’; the individual appears as its elementary form’ (Marx 1982: 125).¹ The form (in this case the commodity-form) appears here as the existence of a matter (wealth) socially and historically determined (in those societies in which the capitalist way of production prevails). This employment is confirmed right away when Marx claims that use value ‘constitute[s] the material content of wealth, whatever its social form [*gesellschaftliche Form*] may be’ (idem: 126). The commodity-form appears as the socially and historically determined way of existence of use value that, so far as it is a dimension of commodity, converts itself in the ‘material bearers of... exchange value’ (ibidem).

However, Marx also claims that commodities manifest their commodity-form ‘in so far as they possess a double form, i.e., a natural form and value form’ (idem: 138). And he repeatedly refers to that ‘natural form’ as the ‘motley natural form’ (idem: 139) or the ‘physical form’ (idem: 147) of use value, as well as the transformation of that ‘form of the materials’ through concrete labor (idem: 133). He also refers to the ‘different concrete forms’: the concrete labors of the joiner, the mason or the spinner assume (idem: 128); the labors of the taylor or the weaver as ‘different forms of expenditure of human labour-power’ (idem: 134); and the ‘difference between its useful forms’ of the different and concrete labors from the taylor and the weaver (idem: 135). Finally, he refers to labor in general as ‘expenditure of human labour-power in a particular form and with a definite aim’ (idem: 137).

Now, that claim that the commodity-form is a double, given that its ‘natural form’ (*Naturalform*) and its ‘value form’ (*Wertform*) coexist raises a question: does form mean the same in both cases? And the same question is risen when money-form is introduced claiming that ‘commodities have a common value-form [*gemeinsame Wertform*] which contrasts in the most striking manner with the motley natural forms [*Naturalformen*] of their use values. I refer to the money-form’ (idem: 139). Does form mean the same in these other expressions? Even assuming that, in a broad sense, not only value but also the use value of the commodity is socially and historically determined (e.g. by the level the development of social labor and productive powers have reached) or even that, in a more specific

sense, the use value is historically and socially determined as long as it is the material base of exchange value (within the commodity-form), it seems difficult to define the concept of form equally in both cases. Indeed, in the last case, the matter of use value form remains material in the common sense of the term, while the matter of value form is purely social. And this difference seems to lead to differences as regards the meaning of the concept of form in both cases.

On a side note, let us add that the very definition of exchange value as ‘the mode of expression, the “form of appearance”, of a content distinguishable from it’ (idem: 127) or ‘the necessary mode of expression, or form of appearance, of value’ (idem: 128) arouses a new difficulty, given that it seems to force us to distinguish between a concept of form as a way of existence per se (value) and a concept of form as a way of manifestation (exchange value) of that same form.

New problems, although with different character, raise the subsequent treatment of the relationships of value in two different senses. On the one hand, Marx employs the term ‘form’ in order to refer to the two poles of expressions of value, the ‘relative value-form’ and the ‘equivalent form’ (idem: 139 and subsequent). And this seems to lead to an assimilation of the concept of form to that of function.² On the other hand, Marx employs the term ‘value form’ (*Wertform*, *ibidem*) to refer to those same value expressions. However, only one of these value forms, the money-form, is the way of existence of a really existent matter, while the remaining refers to logical moments of his derivation of this money-form.³ Indeed, the ‘simple, isolated, or accidental form of value’ (*ibidem*) would only be, in reality, the form of bartering. The ‘total or expanded form of value’ (idem: 154), on the other hand, would not correspond to any reality. And even the ‘general form of value’ (idem: 157) exists only in reality per se as the subsequent money-form. In these cases, simply put, the form appears not only as a way of existence but as a moment of a reasoning. Finally, the very introduction of the money-form as the ‘specific kind of commodity with whose natural form the equivalent form is socially interwoven’ (idem: 162) seems to bring back the necessity of distinguishing between the employment of the concept of form to a bare social matter (as ‘equivalent form’, that is to say, money) and a material matter in a vulgar sense (the ‘natural form’ of a specific commodity, namely, gold). The difference between these two employments of the concept of form seem evident considering the difficulties it implies thinking that the latter gets ‘socially interwoven’ (*gesellschaftlich verwächst*) with the former—fusion that would actually refute the emergence of fiduciary money.

2. This multivocal definition of the term ‘form’ seems to place any attempt of defining its concept in front of a dilemma: either we adopt a broad definition, poor in determinations, that allow us to apply the term to subjects so diverse as social relations, matter in a vulgar sense and logical relations or we adopt a narrower definition, richer in determinations, but exclusively applicable to social relations.

The first option is possible and, as a matter of fact, the determinations of the concept of form, defined in that sense, are relevant and maintained in a narrower definition. Such broad definition wouldn’t be strictly Marxian, rather it would inscribe itself in a philosophical tradition which origins go back to the antiquity and, especially, to Aristotle (1994).⁴ Its fundamental determinations would be the following: the form is one dimension of the couple form/matter (*εἶδος* or *μορφή* / *ύλη*, in Aristotle). Form and matter are inseparable, and therefore form is the way matter exists. There is no matter without form, even though the same matter can acquire different forms. There is also no form without matter, except in thought. Every object (*οὐσία*, in Aristotle) that exists out of thought is, in this sense, a hylemorphic compound. Form and matter can be understood both in absolute and relative terms (both interpretations are possible in Aristotle). And the relation between form and matter can be considered as a static relation (as *μορφή*: structure of the object) or as a dynamic one (as *εἶδος*: activity that converts the object into what it is). The form is, in both cases, that which makes the object what it is (the *τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι*, *τὸ τί ἐστίν*, that is to say, its essence). And therefore, the form of the object is always the reference of our concept from that object.⁵

Defined this way, however, the concept of form is too broad and cannot become the key concept for the critique of capitalist social relations that we are interested in. We therefore must add to it more determinations that are not available nor could be found in Aristotle’s thought, but instead we must look for them in Hegelian-Marxist tradition. We will examine the fundamental determinations of this narrower concept of form in the next section.

3. It still remains true that the concept of form is unthinkable unless thought as one dimension of the couple form/matter, and that form and matter are inseparable. Form remains, therefore, the way a matter exists. But in this case, matter reveals itself, at least in principle, as social relations. And, at the same time, form reveals itself, in consequence, as the in-formation of that matter from social-historical determinations. The latter is, as Marx’s claim affirms, that wealth adopts the commodity-form in ‘those

societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails'. Let us see this difference more thoroughly.

In Aristotle, the matter (*ύλη*) par excellence of form is matter in a natural sense (the *φύσει*; see Aristotle 1995: II). Consequently the privileged relationship between form and matter is the in-formation of matter from an activity of self-conservation that acts as final cause within organisms. This is so, even when Aristotle also considers in a subordinate way the artificial relationship between form and matter in a technical (*τέχνει*) sense—subordination that, of course, reveals the magnificent contempt his slave society held for labor.

But social relations already were, in fact, the matter par excellence of form in German Idealism—even though this social characteristic was hypostatized through different mechanisms in their systems. It so happens when, confronted against the subject/object dualism, idealism had to assume form as the result of an in-formation activity from the subject—assumption that was caution and that, by the way, did not lack of a critical dimension. Kant's transcendental subject is not but the hypostasis of flesh and bone empirical subjects and the capacities they acquired by living in society throughout their history. And so it also happens when, emboldened, idealism tried to overcome that dualism between subject and object within that very same subject—because all idealism is a subjectivism. Hegel's Absolute Spirit, likewise, was not but the hypostasis of society itself as history's subject-object.

Let us remember, on this matter, some lines from Adorno: 'Hegel, in his chapter on master and servant, develops the genesis of self-consciousness from the labor relation, and that he does this by adjusting the I to its self-determined purpose as well as to heterogeneous matter. The origin of "I" in "Not I" remains scarcely veiled. It is looked up in the real living process, in the legalities of the survival of the species, of providing it with nutriments. Thereafter, Hegel hypostatizes the mind, but in vain.⁶ [...] The idealist concept of the spirit exploits the passage to social labor: it is easy for the general activity that absorbs the individual actors to be transfigured into a noumenon while the individuals are ignored.⁷ [...] But even to imagine a transcendental subject without society, without the individuals whom it integrates for good or ill, is just as impossible. This is what the concept of the transcendental subject founders on. Even Kant's universal-ity seeks to be one for all, that is to say, for all rational beings; and the rational are a priori socialized' (Adorno 1973: 198–200).

Social relations are, then, the matter of the forms. However, it suffices taking in consideration this reference from Adorno to the adaptation of the one who works on heterogeneous material to see that this statement is insufficient. Actually, wealth adopts the commodity-form from social and historical determinations in ‘those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails’, as we said, but its matter does not subdue to social relations, given that the products of labor are commodities ‘only because they are something two-fold, both objects of utility, and, at the same time, depositories of value’. The form use value is, certainly, a form of social relations. It is a social form inasmuch as (a) the usefulness of commodities can only be so to its consumers, and it is always socially and historically determined (by the so-called norms of consumption, etc.). It is also social inasmuch as (b) the way the process of (concrete) labor in-form the use value of commodities always presuppose social and historical conditions that are determined (a certain degree of development of social labor productive forces, etc.). And, finally, it is a social form inasmuch as (c) in commodities that use value acts as a mere material support of its value (let us recall the phenomena of obsolescence, planned by companies, of commodities usefulness).

However, it is still true that, that use value is a ‘natural form’. Nature also, in summary, integrates the matter of its form. Even more, if we assume that the matter of the form are social relations, we must acknowledge that in every case nature integrates that matter inasmuch as it mediates both poles of labor: as nature in the object of labor and as nature in the very subject that performs the labor. It is true that both the external nature and the internal nature exist only in that terrain as realities socially mediated by labor (as forms) and by thought (as concepts). But this does not imply that nature can be subdued to society just like that. As Schmidt (2014: 70) points out, ‘in Marx nature is not *merely* a social category’.⁸ And this is not without consequences: the very dialectic of the form commodity is unconceivable if we do not keep in mind use value as its ‘natural form’. The ultimate matters of forms, in summary, are social relations and the socially mediated nature.

It is necessary to remark, before moving on, that we refer to these social relations and to that socially mediated nature as ‘ultimate’ matter of forms because the relationship between form and matter should be understood in relative terms. Actually, the mentioned Marxian definition of exchange value as a ‘necessary way of expression or form of manifestation of value’, or the very definition of this value as ‘abstract human labour’ objectified

in commodity (Marx 1982: 129), among others, suppose that, even though those social relations and socially mediated nature remain the ultimate matter, certain forms are also matter of other more fundamental forms. The statement that social relations and socially mediated nature are the ultimate matter of the forms imply, also, that our analysis of forms rests in the assumption that human beings are social beings and that they interact with nature. This feature of human beings, considered in itself, escapes the historical and social determinations of forms and, consequently, those assumptions possess the status of trans-historical.⁹

4. The relation between form and matter must also be understood as a dynamical one. It was expected that Hegel recovered with enthusiasm this aspect of Aristotelian thinking: the active character this relationship possess in Aristotle versus the mainly passive it had in Plato (Hegel 1955: 138 and subsequent). But the confirmation of this dynamism is not enough—nor could be enough to Hegel—to comprehend the true significance of the relation between form and matter. The discord in the couple is missing. The introduction of contradiction in the relation between the form and its matter implies we should not understand it as an organic relation, moved by an increasing adaptation of the matter to its forms, but basically as a social relation, moved precisely by the unyielding inadequacy of the forms with respect to their matter.

Contradiction, naturally, surrounds Hegel's system completely, as all the objects considered in his system are inherently contradictory and the relations among them are explained by this contradiction. But toward our objective it is convenient to focus, specifically, in the way Hegel presents the relation between form and matter in the doctrine of essence of his great *Logic*. The truth of being is the essence, but is mediated by being; therefore the knowledge of essence is performed through being. This penetration of being to reach the essence is a process of abstraction, that is to say, of negation of determinations. But, given that in Hegel logic is ontology, this process represents at the same time the movement of being itself and, therefore, the negativity we refer to is inherent to that very being: 'essence is what it is, not through a negativity foreign to it, but through one which is its own—the infinite movement of being' (Hegel 2010: 338). This movement of being, that is to say, reflection, is therefore a negative movement. Negativity propels the reflection of being over itself, and essence is not but the development of the auto-contradiction of being. Hegel enunciates, then, the concept of essence as reflection in itself (in the relation between essence and appearance: the essence as simply opposed to

being, the essence coming to existence as appearance and the reflection of essence in itself that conducts to the unity between essence and appearance) and the determinations of this reflection (the determined essences or *essentialities*: the identity, the difference and the contradiction). And it is precisely at this point, in the setting of contradiction as the foundation of existence, that Hegel introduces the relationship between form and matter (idem: 392 and subsequent).

Hegel, then, presents this relationship between form and matter as a contradictory one. Inside the relation between the foundation and what is founded, form is distinguished from essence: form is the active pole that determines, while essence is the passive pole, undetermined, in which the formal determinations subsist. Essence turns out to be the matter of form. Now, the relationship and in-formation of matter by form implies the mutual mediation that is inherent to the relationship of contradiction: ‘the activity of the form on the matter and the reception by the latter of the form determination is only *the sublation of the semblance of their indifference* and distinctness. Thus the determination referring each to the other is the self-mediation of each through its own non-being’ (idem: 393). And this relationship, precisely, consists the contradiction in strict sense, that is, in its specificity not only with respect to identity but even with respect to difference, either as diversity or as opposition.

The relation between form and matter, therefore, is a contradictory one. And setting this contradiction as the foundation of existence allows Hegel (nothing less!) to think in its entirety as a contradictory totality: as a reality that is, in itself and at the same time, reality and possibility (idem: 465 and subsequent; Marcuse 1955: 149 and subsequent). But the process of reflection in its entirety carries from the determinations in itself (from the doctrine of essence) to the determinations for itself (to the doctrine of the concept) because essence, from the start, is not but a moment of concept.¹⁰ And so ends Hegel’s dialectic, in the doctrine of the concept, with the hypostasis of the latter, as the absolute Idea that ‘contains all determinateness within it’ and which essence ‘consists in returning through its self-determination’ (idem: 735).

On the contrary, a consequent concept of this contradictory relationship between form and matter requires a dialectic that is consequently negative. That is, a dialectic that does not end that contradiction between form and matter in concept nor, needless to say, in a hypostasized concept as Absolute Idea, but that can conserve it when thinking the relation between concept and its object. That is, precisely, the very definition of

Adorno's negative dialectic: 'The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy. Contradiction is not what Hegel's absolute idealism was bound to transfigure it into: it is not of the essence in a Heraclitean sense. It indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived' (Adorno 1973: 5). Negative dialectic provides us, then, the most accurate way of thinking critically the contradictory relationship between form and matter.

5. Precisely, the relationship between form and matter is a contradictory one, given the antagonistic character of capitalist society. Form, as we said, is a way of existence. Therefore, the relationship between form and matter is contradictory because, in capitalist society, social relations exist in an antagonistic manner. Forms (commodities, money, etc.) in-form their matter (social relations) in a contradictory way. This statement about the character of contradiction that takes place inside the relationship between form and matter is not without consequences. First, as regards the concept of contradiction itself, the contradiction we are referring to is not, naturally, 'Heraclitean essence' of idealism, but an attribute of the way social life is specifically organized, socially and historically. In other words, as Adorno puts it, 'Regarding the concrete utopian possibility, dialectics is the ontology of the wrong state of things. The right state of things would be free of it: neither a system nor a contradiction' (Adorno 1973: 11).

Second, as regards the contradiction between form and matter, for now considered statically, that contradiction implies that matter does not get reduced to its form—and, therefore, that object is not reduced to its concept. However, if we understand form as the way matter exists, this does not mean (nor could mean) there is something positive in matter that escapes form, that is, something in matter that exists separately from form—and can, therefore, be separately conceptualized. Naturally, social relations have actually adopted non-capitalist ways of existence in all pre-capitalist societies, and many social relations still adopt non-capitalist ways of existence within the very capitalist society. However, inasmuch as social relations assume capitalist forms, their non-capitalist dimensions exist exclusively as an immanent contradiction to the very relationships between the so mentioned social relations both as matter and capitalist forms they adopt. The subsumption of social relations under capitalist forms converts the non-capitalist dimension from something *different to* them into something *negative in* them. That is the meaning of that

subsumption: to convert the external difference in negativity internal to a contradiction. And this, at the same time, converts the contradiction between form and matter in an internal contradiction to form itself. Negative dialectic is the consequent thought of that contradiction—though conserving in its horizon the emancipation of difference with respect to its confinement in negativity. ‘Contradiction is non identity under the aspect of identity [...] Dialectics is the consistent sense of non identity’ (idem: 5).

Third, and fundamentally, as regards the contradiction between form and matter, now dynamically considered, that contradiction is what converts the relationship between both into a dynamical one or, considering it as internal to form itself, a process-form. Precisely, form is not but a process of in-formation of its matter or, in other words, of subsumption of that matter through that conversion between external difference into negativity internal to form itself. Commodity, money and so forth, in this sense, must be understood as historical process of commodification, monetization and so on of social relations. The relationship between form and matter considered from a dialectical perspective is, in this sense, inevitably historical. ‘The mediation of *ύλη* is, actually, its implicit history’. But the history we are talking about is not, naturally, the inevitable deployment of Absolute Spirit’s self-determination, as in Hegel, but the circumstantial class struggle of Marx. ‘It is when things in being are read as a text of their becoming that idealistic and materialistic dialects touch. But while idealism sees in the inner history of immediacy its vindication as a stage of the concept, materialism makes that inner history the measure, not just of the untruth of concepts, but even more of the immediacy in being’ (idem: 52).

It is convenient to stop for a moment in this historical character of form, because it has a decisive importance in this context. Holloway (1980: 134 and later writings) attributes the conception of form as process-form to Sohn-Rethel. Indeed, Sohn-Rethel had ciphered in the authentically historical character of form the difference between the employments of that concept in Marx and in Hegel. ‘The Marxian mode of thought is characterised by a conception of form which distinguishes it from all other schools of thinking. It derives from Hegel, but this only so as to deviate from him again. For Marx, form is time-bound [*zeitbedingt*]. It originates, dies and changes within time. To conceive of form in this way is characteristic of dialectical thought, but with Hegel, its originator, the genesis and mutation of form [*formgenetische und formverändernde Prozeß*] is only within the power of the mind. [...] The Hegelian concept

of dialectic finally entitles the mind not only to primacy over manual work but endows it with omnipotence. Marx, on the other hand, understands the time governing the genesis and the mutation of forms as being, from the very first, historical time—the time of natural and of human history’ (Sohn-Rethel 1978: 18–19).

However, through the introduction of the concept of process-form, Holloway actually radicalizes Sohn-Rethel’s point.¹¹ Indeed, it is not enough to just claim the procedural character of capitalist forms in their origin and historical transformations; it is also necessary to add that its everyday reproduction possesses that procedural feature. The latter statement is, actually, a corollary of the former, as it would ridicule the opposite claim, that the foundation of the existence of form, of its origin and transformations, is radically different to the foundation of its everyday reproduction. That foundation is the contradictory character of capitalist forms as the way of existence of antagonistic social relations. And, in consequence, forms are not given forms, constituted-forms, but process-forms, forms in process of being constituted. They are not forms that have already in-formed their matter, but permanent processes of in-formation of that matter. The money and commodity-forms we have already mentioned are, therefore, everyday processes of commodification and monetization of social relations.¹² This has enormous consequences that will be recovered in what follows.

6. Now, in capitalist society, these relations between form and matter adopt a specific characteristic that we have not yet mentioned: fetishism. Indeed, fetishism is an attribute of capitalist forms. ‘Whence, then, arises the enigmatical character of the product of labour, so soon as it assumes the form of a commodity? Clearly, it arises from this form itself¹³’ (Marx 1982 I: 164). This is also of enormous significance in this context.

Forms, as we have already said, are ways of existence of a given matter. But this statement is still too general and does not precise the specific way in which social relations exist as matter of capitalist forms. Indeed, social relations, as matter of capitalist forms, specifically exist ‘in the mode of being denied’ (according to Gunn’s precise expression). ‘That is, one term [social relations] may exist in and through another *which contradicts it* [commodity, in our case]. This, I take it, is the key to Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism. When we learn that social relations which appear as “material relations between persons and social relations between things” appear, thus, as “what they are” [...], we are being informed of a circumstance that is unintelligible unless the

notion of existence-in-the-mode-of-being-denied is taken on board' (Gunn 1992: 23, who refers Marx 1982 I: 166).

This existence in the way of being denied does not mean any way of concealment of matter behind form, but a specific concealment that involves an inversion: the relationships between human beings adopt the form of relationships between things. 'It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things' (Marx 1982 I: 165). And this inversion involves two moments, which can be analytically distinguished, although they are inseparable in the real exchange that takes place.

On the one hand, the reification of the social character of individual labors in their products: proper commodity fetishism. 'The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers' (idem: 164–165).

On the other hand, the reification of this last global labor in a specific commodity is money: money fetishism consummates, therefore, commodity fetishism. 'It is however precisely this finished form of the world of commodities—the money form—which conceals the social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly. If I state that coats or boots stand in a relation to linen because the latter is the universal incarnation of abstract human labour, the absurdity of the statement is self-evident. Nevertheless, when the producers of coats and boots bring these commodities into a relation with linen, or with gold or silver (and this makes no difference here), as the universal equivalent, the relation between their own private labour and the collective labour of society appears to them in exactly this absurd form [*verrückte Form*]'¹⁴ (idem: 168–169).

It is difficult to exaggerate the significance of this inversion. Indeed, the inversion that takes place in this money and commodity fetishism is, naturally, the inversion between subject and object: the relations between subjects adopt the form of relations between objects. And this specific inversion is nothing less than the foundation—or, better, the *proton pseudos*, to honor Adorno's term—of social objectivity in capitalist society (Backhaus 1993: 56 and subsequent). The relationships between subjects

(their social relations) appear to them as an object (as a second nature). Society is the subject-object relationship in an inverted way. ‘Society as subject and society as object are the same and yet not the same’ (Adorno 1976: 34). Therefore, this specific social objectivity of capitalist society cannot be understood neither assuming society as its own subject (e.g. through the understanding of social action like Weber does) nor understanding it as simple object (through the investigation of social facts, as Durkheim does), but only as ‘the sign of relationships between men which have grown increasingly independent of them, opaque, now standing off against human beings like some different substance’ (Adorno 1989: 275).

The possibility of this task ‘to comprehend the incomprehensible’ (*ibidem*) can arouse serious doubts. But we must remember that forms are process-forms. Fetishism, the reification of social relations inherent to those forms, involves certainly a concealment of this progressive character of fetishized forms. ‘All reification is forgetting’ (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 191). But the forms in question are still contradictory process-forms. And, if we conceive forms as process-forms, we must consider the very fetishism as a process of fetishization (see Holloway 2002: 43 and subsequent). Commodity and money fetishism are, therefore, everyday processes of social relations fetishization and, consequently, open processes. ‘Fetishism is a process of fetishisation, a process of separating subject and object, doing and done, always in antagonism to the opposing movement of anti-fetishisation, the struggle to reunite subject and object, to recompose doing and done’ (*idem*: 89).

7. This fetishism, inherent to the adoption of capitalist forms by social relations, brings to light another attribute of them: their abstraction. ‘Equality in the full sense between different kinds of labour can be arrived at only if we abstract from their real inequality, if we reduce them to the characteristic they have in common, that of being the expenditure of human labour-power, of human labour in the abstract’ (Marx 1982 I: 166). Indeed, the exchange of commodities mediated by money, brings out to light the abstract character of their forms, since it presupposes that commodities only intervene as values (as regards their use value, it presupposes they have one and that they are different between them, although not considering the uniqueness of this use values) and money only intervenes as an universal equivalent (i.e. its use value plainly matches with its function of embodiment of exchange value). These abstractions lay bare, in the exchange process, the conversion of human labor in abstract labor, since the specific labors, qualitatively different from each other, are related

between themselves as objectified abstract labor quantities in different commodities, and this abstract labor, as a whole, is objectified in an independent matter in money.¹⁵

It goes without saying that this abstraction is not a mental one, but a real one—*reale Abstraktion*, to honor the expression employed by Sohn-Rethel.¹⁶ This is the sense of the well-known Marx's sentence: 'by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour. They do this without being aware of it' (idem: 166–167). Commodity and money are not abstract forms that result from subjective processes of abstraction (mental), but from a process of objective abstraction (real) that operates in the reality itself of commodities exchange.¹⁷ Inasmuch as it is all about fetishized forms, although this process of abstraction requires the practice of commodities exchange in the market, it works behind the back of the consciousness of the agents involved in that practice. Commodity and money are, in this sense, objectively abstract forms. Hegel, when discussing with classical political economy, already had defined money as an objective abstraction: 'Money is this material, existent concept [*materielle, existierende Begriff*], the form of unity or the possibility of all the things of necessity' (Hegel 1975: 324) 'But money is not in fact one *particular* resource among others; on the contrary, it is the universal aspect of all of them, in so far as they express themselves in an external existence' (Hegel 2003: 338). And Marx is now without idealism which, repeating Hegel, refers to money as 'existing and active concept of value' (Hegel 2010: 326; Reichelt 2007).

This abstraction, objective attribute of capitalist forms, possesses important ontological implications, as it allows us to precise a little bit more the features of the social objectivity in capitalist society. The concrete relations between the subjects appear objectified to them as abstract relations. The second nature is, therefore, a world of abstractions. 'The system constituted by abstract labor embodies a new form of social domination', according to Postone, 'a form of *abstract, impersonal domination*' (2003: 158–159).

The concept of real abstraction has got, besides, epistemological implications. In the first pages we said that the form of the object is always the reference of its concept. This relation between concept and object must now be specified in the light of distinction between mental abstraction and real abstraction. All concept remains, naturally, the result of a process of mental abstraction. But there is a specificity when this subjective process

of abstraction has as its counterpart a process of objective abstraction given that, in such case, the former may aspire to reproduce the latter in thought. If, as affirmed by Sohn-Rethel, the abstraction of exchange possesses the form of thought, thinking then consists in reproducing that form in thought.¹⁸

Marxist dialectics can be understood as such an attempt to reproduce those forms in thought. Forms continue to in-form matter in objects, and remain being the reference of our concepts in this dialectic. Forms continue to play, therefore, a constitutive role, similar to the one the forms of sensitivity and categories of understanding play in Kant's transcendental aesthetics and logic. But there are important differences. The main one is the status of a priori inherent to that constitution in both cases. Indeed, in Marxist dialectic, this a priori status does not only involve the subject that knows but also the object to be known; it is not transcendent but immanent to history and, as long it involves that knower, it is not generical but social. This means that the forms in question are not only subjective but, at the same time, objective; that, both in objective and subjective terms, they are products of historical development; and that, in subjective terms, therefore, they are not attributes of human being in general but of individuals socialized in specific historical conditions.¹⁹

8. What has been exposed up to this point suffices, in some measure, to precise the meaning of the concept of form within the Marxian critique to political economy. However, before we conclude, we must reconsider the concept of form from the perspective of class struggle, that is, get back to our claim that it is a key concept to the critique of capitalist social relations and make the reasons that justify this claim explicit, as well as its political implications.

We claim that the concept of form explains the way in which social relations in capitalist society exist. And, in this way, from the point of view of the anti-capitalist critique, it allows us to precise the objectives of such critique. This, in itself, is already decisive. Marx himself dedicated innumerable pages to argue against other socialists of his time with regard to the objectives an anti-capitalist critique should have. Let us remember, for example, his objections to the idea the 'socialist Ricardians' held, that is, that suppressing money should overcome social inequalities that were breaking through commodities exchange. Already in his early critique to Proudhon, Marx precisely identified the weak spot of this idea: 'the first question he [Proudhon] should have asked himself was, why, in exchanges as they are actually constituted, it has been necessary to individualize

exchangeable value, so to speak, by the creation of a special agent of exchange' (Marx 2010c: 145). That idea of suppressing money within exchange is irrelevant, Marx suspected at the time, because there is a necessary relation between commodity-form and money-form within it. But Marx would only precise the nature of this relation when, thanks to the development of his critique of political economy, he precised also the nature of those money and exchange forms. In his next critique to Gray, Marx raises the same question: 'since labour time is the intrinsic measure of values, why use another extraneous standard as well? Why is exchange value transformed into price? Why is the value of all commodities computed in terms of an exclusive commodity, which thus becomes the adequate expression of exchange value, i.e. money? This was the problem which Gray had to solve' (Marx 2010d: 321). But Marx's answer was more accurate this time: commodities 'are only comparable as the things they are', and they are 'products of isolated independent individual kinds of labour, and through their alienation in the course of individual exchange they must prove that they are general social labour' (idem: 321–322). Money must necessarily face the individual commodities, within exchange, as the incarnation of that social general labor. And commodities, therefore, should be exchanged according to prices. The idea of suppressing the money-form in conditions where wealth still assumes the commodity-form implies then the absurd that '*goods are to be produced as commodities, but not exchanged as commodities*' (idem: 322). In short, the 'differentiation of the commodity into two elements, commodity and money [*Verdopplung der Ware in Ware und Geld*]', is a necessary one because it is not but 'an external opposition which expresses the opposition between use-value and value which is inherent in it' (Marx 1982 I: 199).

The strategy the socialists had of suppressing money overlooked this necessary bond between commodity and money. But let us acknowledge that, at least, their critiques to money implied that they recognized money as one of the fundamental ways of existence of capitalist social relations. The importance of the concept of form for anti-capitalist critique becomes even more evident when we consider strategies that without further ado ignore the fact that these social relations assume determined and fundamental ways of existence. Indeed, in capitalist society, the antagonistic character of social relations, once a certain threshold within the processes of collective subjectivation is overcome, tends to express itself as class struggle. But this class struggle tends, at the same time, to adopt capitalist ways of existence. Class struggle adopts different ways of unfolding in

different social scenarios and different historical circumstances, but these ways of unfolding always tend to be in-formed by capitalist forms. On its end, these capitalist forms, as ways of existence of antagonistic social relations, crystallize balances of power between classes, whatever the circumstances.

Now, social struggles are normally oriented to a modification of these crystallized balances of power that capitalist forms have, instead of tending to their suppression. And this is not random as it has to do, on the one hand, to that same tendency of capitalist forms of in-forming the very class struggles and, on the other hand, to the inherent fetishism of those forms. In consequence, if we did not possess the concept of form, we would be incapable of differentiating between the struggles that remain within the boundaries of capitalist forms and those that tend to overcome them. We could not distinguish, for example, between struggles that remain locked inside the wage-form and those who tend to overcome it.

We may argue that the difference between a struggle for wage raise and a struggle for the workers management of a factory is evident and does not require the assistance of the analysis of the form. However, this objection would underestimate the influence of the fetishism inherent to wage-form in the workers' consciousness, thanks to which wage appears regularly as the payment the worker provides to the production process of wealth, payment supposedly in accordance to their level of productivity (Marx 1982 III: 1056). And that objection is even completely irrelevant the moment we consider examples of class struggle that face even more fetishized forms of social relations, like state-form.²⁰ If the difference between a wage raise and the suppression of waged labor seemed evident, it is not evident at all the difference between the modification of the balance of power that is instituted in state apparatus and the suppression of state itself as a form. The appearance of state neutrality, that is, the concealment of its necessary capitalist character inasmuch as it is a form behind the circumstantial balance of power that crystallizes within itself as apparatus, is a product of the fetishism the very state-form possess. Reformist strategies as a whole can be defined, in this sense, as strategies that underestimate forms, underestimation normally disguised as demagogic pragmatism that is not but the conversion to ideology of the very fetishist character of those forms. These forms constitute, on the other hand, the main point of attack of revolutionary strategies.

All this, though important, does not expose completely the importance of the concept of form for anti-capitalist critique. In effect, up to this

point, the concept of form has helped us precise the objectives of this critique, but it does not tell us anything about the possibility of such critique. It may even appear that the concept of form closed that possibility inasmuch as, on the one hand, we claim that forms in fact in-form social relations in a fetishist way and, on the other hand, we assume that such critique can only be immanent to them.²¹ However, even when it is true that the concept of form also helps us to understand the difficulties the anti-capitalist critique faces, it does not close its possibility. Indeed, as we have already pointed out, capitalist forms are ways of existence of antagonist social relations and, therefore, are contradictory forms. Let us add now that, in this contradiction of capitalist forms, we found its aperture. Capitalist forms, inasmuch as they are contradictory, are not closed forms but process-forms. And, also, the fetishism of these forms, as process-forms, is not a closed one, but a process of fetishization. In the end, the reproduction or not of capitalist forms, that is to say, of the irrational way social relations exist under capitalism, depends of class struggle.

This article was translated by Santiago Soullignac.

NOTES

1. This does not mean, however, that Marx's argument starts with the form commodity. As Holloway correctly pointed out already (Holloway 2015), his starting point is wealth (*der Reichtum*) in its diversity, wealth that appears enclosed in the commodity-form, in those societies in which the capitalist way of production prevails (see, to extend his argument, Holloway 2018). The importance of this nuance will be clear further.
2. Because of this Marxian use of the concept, Rubin tends to assimilate the concepts of form and function (Rubin 1990: 31 and subsequent). Although there actually is a relation between both concepts, which we cannot examine here, it is not convenient to reduce the analysis of form to one function.
3. If we accept that the Marxian exposition of the categories follows a logical order instead of a historical one (as it should, since Rosdolsky 1977: 109 and subsequent), some moments of that exposition do not have to be referred to forms in the sense of effective ways of existence of social relationships—although naturally, in such cases, Marx would be employing the concept of form in a different way.
4. Surely Marx kept in mind Aristotelian thinking when employing the concept of form in his critique of political economy. Already, young Marx knew about the Aristotelian employment of the concept (as it is evident in his reading notes of *De Anima* in 1839–1840) and, in particular, the

- Aristotelian and anti-Platonic doctrine of the soul as an inseparable form of the body (Aristotle 1978: 48 and subsequent). He also profoundly admired the ‘Greek philosophy’s Alexander of Macedon’ (according to the expression he used in his doctoral thesis of 1841; Marx 2010a: 34).
5. Our recovery of the antique meaning of the concept of ‘form’ may seem irrelevant, but it is not, because the relation between the inherited thought and language should not consist in inventing new terms nor attributing arbitrary meanings to the ones that are available. Adorno claimed on that respect: ‘the task of a philosophical treatment of philosophical terminology cannot other than to rekindle the coagulated life in those terms’ and ‘the most fruitful way of communicating an original thought from the point of view of language consists in palming with the terminology that was inherited from tradition, while incorporating to it new constellations through which the related terms are expressed in a completely different way’ (Adorno 1983: 15, 35). This is exactly what Marx did when recovering that old term in his critique of political economy.
 6. Adorno naturally refers to the Hegelian development of the key concept of self-consciousness (Hegel 1977: 111–119). This link between spirit and labor, established in the introduction to the system (in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*), is lost in his further unfolding (particularly in the *Science of Logic*). But, as it is known, young Marx took advantage of that dialectic of lordship and bondage to his notion of alienated labor (Marx 2010b: 270 and subsequent).
 7. Transfiguration is mirrored, according to Adorno, in ‘Marx’s Hegelian-trained theory of the law of value, which capitalism realizes over the heads of men’ (Adorno: *ibidem*). We will keep this in mind further.
 8. The just and necessary rejection of vulgar materialism does not imply (as it happens in young Lukács 1971) the reduction of nature to a mere social category. On the contrary, an accurate definition of materialism requires avoiding that reduction (see the argument in favor of the ‘object’s preponderance’ in Adorno (1973: 183)).
 9. Although it is true that, in some way, young Marx (2010b) fell in temptation of articulating this supposition in an anthropological philosophy—attempt that he would abandon later—we do not believe that it is a supposition that compromises his further analysis of forms in his critique of political economy.
 10. Essence is not, as Hegel had already warned us at the beginning of the corresponding section of his tiny *Logic*, ‘the concept as *posited* concept’—as confessing beforehand that his system would not be *constructed* from contradiction—but that it *had already been constructed* retrospectively from identity (Hegel 1991: 175).

11. Radicalization that results from the very ‘opening of Marxist categories’ proposed by *open marxism*. ‘This openness appears in, for instance, a dialectic of subject and object, of form and content, of theory and practice, of the constitution and reconstitution of categories in and through the development, always crisis-ridden, of a social world’ (Bonefeld et al. 1992: 11).
12. The elementary forms of commodity and money are enough to develop our argument because in the in-formation of human activity as abstract labor and of the product of that activity as value objectified in the commodity and represented in money, we find the expression of the antagonistic character of social relations in capitalism. But we cannot forget at this point that the same considerations are valid for the capital form. The contradictory character of capital as a way of existence of antagonistic social relations, which is expressed in an aggravated way in its big crisis and its corresponding process of reorganization—or, eventually, in its overcoming as an irrational way of organizing society—is also characteristic in its everyday reproduction.
13. Needless to say that this fetishism Marx attributes here to the elementary commodity-form is, even more, still an attribute of the more complex forms that social relations assume in capitalist society: it is money fetishism (Marx 1982 I: 187), capital fetishism (1982 II: 303) and money-capital fetishism (1982 III: 515).
14. Bonefeld (2001) notices that this expression from Marx (*‘verrückte Form’*, translated in English as ‘absurd form’) actually has two meanings, both relevant: ‘absurd form’ (*verrückte*) certainly refers to the irrationality of money as a way of organizing social relationships; ‘displaced form’ (*verrückte*), on the other hand, acknowledges the reification of social labor as a whole in a specific commodity (translating ‘perverted form’, in that case, would be even more appropriate).
15. The conversion of human labor into abstract labor is manifested in exchange but, inasmuch capitalist production is commodity production, such conversion is a process that actually starts in the sphere of production—and it is consummated in the sphere of circulation. Labor as an activity and its product are already in-form as abstract labor and value in the process of production.
16. This idea of a process of abstraction that operates in reality itself is distinctively Marxian—although unthinkable without the development of German idealism in general and Hegelian in particular. It does not find any place, in consequence, in Althusser’s (1969) distinction between the concrete (‘real object’) and the abstract (‘object of thought’) that, *malgré lui*, is barely a sophisticated version of the *Diamat*’s crude objectivism (see Sohn-Rethel 1978: 20).

17. To further precise the features of this idea of real abstraction, in contrast with mental abstraction, it is convenient to go back at the way Marx distinguishes between labour *in general* and *abstract* labour in 1857 *Einleitung*—given that the abstraction of the forms commodity and money has its roots in the abstraction of labour as activity in capitalist society (Marx 1973: 103 and subsequent).
18. It is worth noting here that not all concepts may aspire to have such forms as counterparts. Marx usually employs the term ‘categories’ (*Kategorien*) to refer to the concepts of commodity, money, that is to say, precisely those concepts that manifest the fundamental ways of existence of social relations in capitalism. But this does not imply that Marx only employs these kinds of concepts (see the distinction between the concepts of labor in general and abstract labor indicated in the previous endnote).
19. Due to the limitations of space, we cannot stop here to consider bolder interpretations of these relationships between subjective and objective forms, such as the relationship established by Sohn-Rethel 1978) between form and abstract thought or the analogy drawn by (Žižek 1989) between form and unconscious.
20. It is known that Marx—although he thought of doing so—never got to systematically derive the state-form within his critique of political economy. The so called State derivation debate, however, showed definitively that Marxian critique of capitalist forms could be extended to the state-form (Holloway and Picciotto 1978; Bonnet and Piva 2017 in Spanish).
21. To assume criticism as immanent is equivalent, in political terms, to assume emancipation as self-emancipation, i. e., the first thesis of the International Association of Workers: ‘The emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself’.

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The Real Contradictions (Commodities as Coherence of Contradiction)

Cristián Sucksdorf

CONTRADICTION AND REALITY

The concrete task in these pages is to establish some interpretative guidelines for Marx's understanding of the relationship between bodies and representations, but limiting the analysis to its most evident manifestation: the *real* existence of contradictions.

We still need to establish which can be the common thread to make explicit how Marx analyzes, from the perspective of the *praxis*, the specific relationship between contradictions and reality in capitalism. Firstly we should be aware of something evident: a contradiction (counter-*dictio*) is something of the order of discourse, that is, of the order of representation or abstraction, but not of the bodies. There is no contradiction (nor negation) whatsoever between bodies.¹ What is more: contradiction in the strong sense (logic contradiction) shows the limit of language, the point in which language cannot even point to something in the world. An unbreachable barrier that therefore becomes the ultimate criterion of falsehood: if it is possible to demonstrate that a discourse is contradictory,

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it follows it must necessarily be false; such is the most classical means of refutation.

Matters became more complicated as Hegel located the heart of truth in contradiction precisely. Identity based on its rejection² would express only half-truth: the abstract part of truth. Reality would be then not the stillness of identity, but the movement of ‘get to be’. Meaning was not in the indeterminate being (indistinguishable from nothingness), but in the swinging movement between being and nothingness which are the determinations, that is, the becoming (*werden*). Then, this is about becoming what one is: the *Idea* that returns to itself. So, in the dialectic conflict, contradiction finds its right to the world. But such right has a cost: the World is under the sovereignty of dialectics; the order of the bodies subsumed to meaning and, consequently, to thought.

We are facing symmetrical orders. On the one hand, the classical way that radiates contradiction out of the world. From this perspective, contradiction is not only impossible in the World of the bodies—and therefore has only an *ideal* existence—but also is the limit of language and what is thinkable; it is, then, even if this may be apparently redundant, of an *unreal* identity. On the other hand, there is Hegel’s way, which emphasizes the ‘real’ quality of contradiction, but at the expense of turning reality itself in its derivation, that is to say, in idealization. Contradiction is then real, but only because reality has become *ideal*. In both cases, the ideal quality of contradiction is asserted, be it *real* or *unreal*.

Going back to Marx, we may now notice what makes his approach singular and separates him from tradition. Firstly, we must point out that Marx does not conceive contradiction in terms of ideality,³ contradiction in itself is real, that is, it is articulated in an *immediate* way with the bodies, although that does not imply that bodies and meanings get confounded in the same plane.⁴ But how is it possible to conceive a contradiction as *reality* if not subsuming it, as Hegel does, to the reality of representation, to ideality, so that both will coincide?

As we saw before, Marx’s position implies a double order. Looking closely at it, we find it evident that any contradiction in itself, as long as it is an abstraction, belongs to the order of discourse and, therefore, it ‘does not exist’ in the world of the bodies (or, considering it a body, merely *flatus vocis*). However, to be considered ‘real contradiction’, it must be part of reality, that is to say, be of the same substance as bodies. How to interpret such a relationship in which the abstraction belongs also to reality? It may be useful to resource, for the sake of illustration, to a more

developed form of this approach. Among the most remarkable continuations of this conception—which Marx leaves underdeveloped or not very explicitly developed—there is Foucault’s critique to Marxism; more specifically, his conception of the *‘dispositif’*. With this concept, Foucault (who claims not to be Marxist, but whose work is very influence by Marx’s thought) tried to understand the situation in which *‘something that does not exist able to become something [real]*. It is not an illusion since it is precisely a set of practices, *real practices*, which established it and thus imperiously marks it out in reality’ (Foucault 2008: 37). But how can something does not exist become real, in other words, be at once real and inexistent? Let us have a look to Foucault’s most quoted example, the *dispositif* of sexuality. The emergence of ‘sexuality’ as a *dispositif* is formed by the discourses and practices that order the bodies; it belongs then to a discursive order, essentially performative. Simply put: a series of discourses that promote and circumscribe practices and that, from a certain historical point onward, manage to establish as a horizon of action for the bodies in a certain sphere that, at the same time, they have created. Foucault stresses that a *dispositif* consists of the fact that it ‘effectively marks out in reality that which does not exist’ (idem). What this concept of dispositive makes particularly visible is that to avoid dualist options we must conceive reality in a way that accounts for the innervation of discourse—that is, of meaning—in the bodies and their practices. Meanings do not exist in reality—but as *flatus vocis*—but once they constitute the discursive order, they innervate the bodies and determine their horizons of possibility, and thus have a real, practical existence.

And this is precisely the novelty in Marx’s thought⁵: a way to avoid the dualist Choice is to broaden the field of the real⁶ and include in it the meaning as articulation of the bodies. We must make clear that, for Marx, this was not just a reflection on the general forms of the relationship between bodies and representations, he aimed to investigate their specific articulation in the capitalist society; to account for the differential ways in which representations—the meaning—constitute real practices and thus modify the bodies and their interrelations, but also, how that meaning forms in the active life—in actual, concrete practices—of the many inter-related bodies. Possibly the best-known (and best-rounded) expression of these relations is the one Marx develops in the section *The Fetishism of Commodities*, in the Volume I of *The Capital*, but we believe all his work gravitates in some way toward this problem.

It is to account for that non-explicit kernel of Marx's thought that we resource to the concept of real abstraction. In his work *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, Alfred Sohn-Rethel (1980) proponent that Marx's work conceives the relationship between bodies and meanings that constitutes capitalism as a conglomerate of 'real abstractions', that is, a system of representations that take place not only in thought but also have a real existence among the bodies, a practical existence, although they still remain abstractions. Commodities, those 'physical-metaphysical' things and money as their developed form constitute a central manifestation of such real abstractions.

In these pages—and as a work hypothesis—we assume that these real abstractions with which Marx interrogates the historical specificity of capitalism⁷ do not consist of abstractions in general, but, as we have mentioned before, it is contradictions that support the grid of bodies and representations: a growing system of *real contradictions*. We must admit, however, that in this *use* of the concept of real abstraction—reconfigured as real contradiction—we are moving away from the original determinations given by its author and the specific sphere where they functioned. Let us briefly see what the original proposal in Sohn-Rethel's *Intellectual and Manual Labor* consists of, so as to retake later the problem of the real contradiction.

REAL ABSTRACTIONS

Although Sohn-Rethel intended to broaden the general understanding of Marx's thought—as, in his view, 'the unproclaimed theme of *Capital* and of the commodity analysis is in fact the real abstraction' (Sohn-Rethel 1980: 28)—his concept seeks mainly to account for the possibility conditions of pure thought, separated from the world and experience.⁸ That is to say, the conditions for the 'thought-form' (*Denkform*) which is the basis for the Western world. His intent is to establish a genealogy of the abstract quality of thought, and this genealogy will find its unproclaimed origin in commodities. But how is it possible for commodities to account for the raise of pure thought? The starting point of Sohn-Rethel is the assumption of a 'the secret identity of commodity form and thought form' (idem: 9). Such identity (or, strictly speaking, isomorphism) of thought and commodity is not a given, a mere fact; understanding it presupposes tracking down its material genesis. In other words, its historical inscription as a determination of practical life is precisely what will allow linking the

abstract way of thinking to commodities. The determination of practical life—therefore real and historical—that commodities produce and lie at the foundation of abstract thinking is, for Sohn-Rethel, the Trading Exchange in general and money as its developed expression. Consequently, it is the practice of trading exchange where the historical determinations of pure thought are to be sought.

The discipline that bourgeois society developed to account for that thought-form is the philosophical epistemology: ‘the theory of scientific knowledge undertaken with the aim of elaborating a coherent, all-embracing ideology to suit the production relations of bourgeois society’ (idem: 22). And Kant’s Critique, to Sohn-Rethel, is ‘the classical manifestation of the bourgeois fetishism of intellectual labour’ (ibidem). That is why, in Kant’s epistemology, it must be proven that pure thought, the thought-form, presupposes (and is based on) the trading Exchange, and therefore individual commodity is its fundamental form.⁹ Therefore, to inscribe historically and materially the faculty to know implies for Sohn-Rethel to trace the history of trading exchange. This is why the genealogy he undertakes goes back to ancient Greece and the emergence of the currency as foundations for abstract thought.¹⁰ So in Sohn-Rethel’s view, the practice of trading exchange—developed until reaching the currency mediation—is what produced the passage from the brute fact of material existence to the representation that transfixes it into ‘abstract fact’, and consequently, in which the rift opens in the core of material reality, a discrimination in identity: *an abstraction in reality*.

The practical and material production of abstraction begins in the hand before it reaches the mind. Paraphrasing famous words: individuals do the abstraction that trading exchange presupposes although they do not know it. Sohn-Rethel’s work then entails in showing the genesis of the ‘commodity-abstraction’ to extend its determinations to the ‘thought-abstraction’.

DIFFERENCES WITH SOHN-RETHEL

At this point, we separate from the original determinations of Sohn-Rethel’s concept because our concern is not the formation of pure consciousness or abstract thinking, but the particular mode of construction and functioning of real abstractions (or real contradictions) in Marx’s work. We leave aside then any reference to Kant’s epistemology and the formation of consciousness. But before redirecting the analysis of Marx’s

thought, we must raise objections to the basis of Sohn-Rethel's thesis, as the aspects of it that depart from Marx will aid our passage from the 'universal' form of real abstraction (that is to say, from ancient Greece to our days) to the particular form of real contradiction in terms of a specific difference of capitalism.

The first objection is the fact of building real abstraction exclusively on the grounds of the exchange of commodities *in general*, regardless of whether the exchange occurred in, for example, the capitalist mode of production, in feudal times or in antiquity. Such equiparation is possible because the analysis closes at the moment of *exchange*, leaving out its specific relation with *production* and *consumption*, and so the mere existence of commodities (with the sole specificity that the use of currency has been achieved) is enough to equiparate modes of production as diverse as the ancient, the feudal and the capitalist one. The second objection regards assimilating the abstraction implied in a commodity to the act of separating use during the exchange. Let us see the first of our disagreements.

COMMODITY IN GENERAL AND CAPITALIST COMMODITY: 'AN IMMENSE ACCUMULATION OF COMMODITIES'

Sohn-Rethel's argument begins with the idea that wherever there is trading exchange, there is already real abstraction. Consequently, those abstractions are the same in antiquity, feudal times or in the capitalist modernity: 'The class antagonisms which commodity production engenders *in all its stages*—in Marx's terms 'the ancient classical, the feudal, and the modern bourgeois modes of production' are intrinsically connected with closely corresponding forms of division of head and hand (...)' (Sohn-Rethel 1980: 18, our italics).

What this perspective does not take into account is that there are many senses to 'commodity'. Or better still, that in capitalism, the commodity has a specificity that separates it from any other historical instant of trading exchange as a mere exchange of surplus production. Only in capitalism do commodities become the dominant mode of social relations and exchanges. Lukács cleverly noticed this specificity of capitalist commodities: 'the problem of commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem in economics, but as the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects. Only in this case can the structure of commodity-relations be made to yield a model of all the

objective forms of bourgeois society together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them' (Lukács 1969: 89).

The matter is that in capitalism, all social relations refer to commodities. This is why the *via regia* to understand capitalist societies is to analyze commodities; however, it is for the same reason the specificity of commodities makes it impossible for it to be a universal category through which to analyze any society at any historical time. A category that we endeavor to use for the analysis of reality cannot be central to any historical time or any society. A concept that encompasses a universal reality is incapable of having a hold in the world; it belongs to theology or metaphysics in the most ethereal sense. For each historical moment, there can only be a group of simple categories (which in turn must consist of evermore concrete forms, following the method indicated by Marx in his famous 1857 *Einleitung*) to explain *that* reality and not 'reality in general', which is nothing but the negation of reality, that is, ideality.

But what are those specific determinations of commodities in capitalism? Marx states it in the first sentence of *The Capital* (descendent from that of *contribution to the Critique*): 'The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, *presents itself* as "an immense arsenal of commodities", its *unit* being a single commodity' (Marx 1973: 3, our italics).¹¹ What defines the capitalist commodity then is that it is the way in which wealth *presents itself* and not just one of its many manifestations. But there is more: the commodity is the *unit* of wealth, so, in capitalism, wealth comes in the *form* of commodities. If we take into account that for Marx wealth is considered in itself (i.e. 'beyond its limited bourgeois form'), it is 'the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces etc., created through universal exchange' (Marx 2007: 447; MEW 42 1983: 396), we can infer then that the commodity-form is, in capitalism, the form of social relationships. Briefly put, all social relationships in capitalism are ruled by the trade grammar, that is, its form. Consequently, commodities in capitalist societies are not 'things' or mere objects or surplus products, they are the objective form of subjective Bonds; in other words, the interrelations in which individuals exist have become things, an 'immense accumulation of commodities'. Because of these determinations, exclusive to capitalism, Lukács asserts that the commodity is the 'the model of all the objective forms of bourgeois society, together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them' (Lukács 1969: 89).

It is for this reason that there are many meanings to ‘commodity’. In ancient and feudal societies, it refers to a marginal, secondary phenomenon of trading surplus products (and therefore, a signal of the limits between a community and the next one)¹²; in the capitalist society, to the way in which wealth presents itself as a monstrous grid of things. This implies the crystallization of social relationships in a ‘relation’ between objects. To sum up, only in capitalism are commodities invested with the quality of ‘fetishism’.¹³

If we turn our attention back to Sohn-Rethel’s generalization on the explicative force of the analysis of the ‘exchange of commodities in all its stages’, we shall see it is based on a confusion between the exchange of commodities in general (a mere scheme, supra-historic form and therefore non-existent in the world) and the real determinations that commodities concretely adopt in capitalism, and that turn it into the central category for the analysis of these societies in particular. Consequently, if in certain society, commodities are *not* the form of wealth, or the way in which it ‘presents itself’ (something that only occurs in capitalism, and so it is *its* specificity), that category *cannot* be the main one to understand the determinations of such society. Briefly put, the problem in equiparating the mere exchange of *surplus products* in different communities (the antiquity, for instance) to the trade grammar characteristic of capitalism, which consists in the crystallization of social relationships (fetishism), or, what is another aspect of the same thing, in wealth presenting itself as an ‘immense accumulation of commodities’.

EXCHANGE AND USE VALUE: FROM ABSTRACTION TO THE DISSOLUTION OF CONTRADICTION

Our second disagreement with Sohn-Rethel’s proposal regards the way in which he deals, in practice, with real abstraction. His starting point is unquestionable: ‘The form of commodity is abstract and abstractness governs its whole orbit’. In other words, the identity of that (real) abstraction and commodity. On the other hand, the problem arises when we enquire about the orbit referred, or, better still, the concrete social practice that holds the real abstraction in commodities. Sohn-Rethel clearly points out: ‘(...) to be labour products is not a property which accrues to the commodities and to money in the relationship of exchange where the abstraction arises. *The abstraction does not spring from labour* but from exchange

as a particular mode of social interrelationship, and it is through exchange that the abstraction imparts itself to labour, making it “abstract human labour” (Sohn-Rethel 1980: 15–16, our italics).

The abstract quality of commodities would then spring only from exchange, and not from labor. Its origin as a commodity would be in the immediacy of exchange, not in the modality of labor that produced it, because ‘to be labour products is not a property which accrues to the commodities’. Labor generates a mere product, a utility; exchange turns that into a commodity. This is so, simply, because the only *general* determination of commodities, in other words, valid for any historical moment, is to be an exchangeable product. Therefore, following this thread of thought, labor is always concrete labor that creates useful things and only *post festum* exchange reconverts that concrete labor into ‘abstract human labor’. But there is more, as the choice to base the real abstraction of the commodity-form in the moment of exchange—instead of doing so in the production and labor—entails also a reduction of commodity to only one of its parts: value. The abstraction that started in the commodity-form ends as the separation (abstraction) of use value (*La abstracción que comenzaba con la forma-mercancía, culmina ahora como separación (abstracción) del valor de uso*):

commodity exchange is abstract because it excludes use; that is to say, the action of exchange excludes the action of use. (...) Therefore while it is necessary that their action of exchange should be abstract from use, there is also necessity that their minds should not be. The action alone is abstract. The abstractness of their action will, as a consequence, escape the minds of the people performing it. In exchange, *the action is social, the minds are private*. (Idem: 35)

The commodity becomes then pure value: the currency form abstracted from its dealing with the things. If we stick to the definition of commodity as a bearer (*Träger*) of use value, there would not be an exchange of commodities, given that the trading circulation, C-M-C (‘selling for buying’), as well as the circulation of money, M-C-M (‘buying for selling’), entails the metamorphosis of commodities into money, and therefore imply that the use value is something ultimately inseparable from value. If exchange disregarded use value and limited itself to exchange values, there would be the motionless and impossible form: Money-Money-Money. That is, nonsense.¹⁴ Such abstraction of use value would mean, in turn, that in the

exchange, there has been an abstraction of the commodity itself. Abstraction would have lost its justification. The contradictory materiality of commodity—its body, as Marx would say—disappears then from the real scene and only plays a phantom role¹⁵ in the mind of the buyer. The practice is reduced to the exchange of values, not commodities; and so, we are not facing real abstraction, but, yet again, an ideal abstraction. The contradictory unit of commodity has been supplanted by a juxtaposition of two different modalities, which are in some sense contradictory: *‘the action is social, the minds are private’*. We are no longer looking at a contradiction, but at the contraposition of a real form, the action of exchanging, to the ideal form, a representation in the mind.

A shift has taken place. At the beginning, abstraction had its basis in the commodity as an abstraction that exists in reality, given that ‘The form of commodity is abstract and abstractness governs its whole orbit’. However, as more determinations are added, we understand that the true basis of real abstraction for Sohn-Rethel is not the commodity itself, but the *actions* of exchange and use that it presupposes: ‘Marx begins by distinguishing use-value and exchange-value as the major contrasting aspects of every commodity. We trace these aspects to the different human activities to which they correspond, the actions of use and the action of exchange. The relationship between these two contrasting kinds of activity, use and exchange, is the basis of the contrast and relationship between use-value and exchange-value’ (Idem: 31).

What does this shift from commodities to the actions of use and exchange imply? As we have seen, it is possible to understand commodities in two senses. In the first place, a general mode, in which commodities exist since antiquity (although never as the central form of societies, being just its limits and porosity) that consists only of being a surplus product from labor, interchangeable for others. Secondly, a mode specific to capitalism, in which the totality of commodities (‘immense accumulation of commodities’) is the way in which wealth presents itself and, therefore, the representation of all social bonds (let us bear in mind that those bonds constitute wealth beyond the ‘limited bourgeois form’). The latter mode of commodities as the form of wealth, and, fundamentally, of the social bond, is the only one that is of interest to Marx because it is specific to capitalism. Having said that, it is evident that this way in which wealth *presents itself* as an ‘immense accumulation of commodities’ is already an abstraction. Something, of the order of meaning, different from the mere existence of bodies.¹⁶ It is the irruption of abstraction in the realm on

active life. The social relations that make up wealth in its total form, that is to say, the active life and its possibility conditions (accumulated and possible relations of individuals among themselves and with nature) *present themselves* now projected or re-presented on things. In other words, the meaning of commodities in capitalism makes the products of labor inseparable from the fact that social relations are represented in them: commodities are that impossible unity of value and use value. These two determinations of commodities—value and use value—can be expressed in different contradictory pairs, depending on which aspect we stress: as physical-metaphysical or sensuous-suprasensuous, as individual-universal or private-social and so on, but its most important expression is the one that points to its genesis in contradiction, that is, the fact that it is at the same time a result of *concrete* labor (use value) and *abstract* labor (value). The real and the idea coexist in the commodity as contradiction.

At this junction, we can better understand the consequences or the shift that Sohn-Rethel proposed to give basis to the real abstraction. Firstly, such passage is done through an unspoken operation: it equiparates the determinations of commodities' (exchange) value and use value, with the actions of *exchanging* and *using*, and so this equiparation hides precisely the difference between these moments. Which is that difference hidden by the equiparation? The contradiction. *Use* and *exchange* are unrelated activities; they could not be linked at all. If they are related, it is accidentally, externally, in their borders and limits. They can only exist together as alternation: when *exchanging* takes place, *using* disappears from the real scene and accrues to the possible, and vice versa. In the determinations of commodities, on the contrary, the relation between use value and value implies contradiction, but also identity. Each instance is negating the other, while at the same time it is asserting it as a necessary correlation. With use value only, it is not a commodity, but a mere object or good; on the other hand, value as such always points back to its material dimension, that is, to some use value. Without that material dimension, value is nothing. For the products of labor to be commodities, then their existence must be subjected to the double quality of being at the same time value and use value. This is the meaning hidden in the oxymoron with which Marx defines the commodity: 'sensuously suprasensuous thing' (*sinnlich übersinnliches Ding*) or 'physical-metaphysical'. In the passage from the determinations of commodities to the actions of *using* and *exchanging*, there is also a passage from a contradictory unit (the commodity) to an alternative relation (exchanging and using) that is not underlined by any

contraction. Consequently, the final movement through which Sohn-Rethel refers to real abstraction as a substitution of commodities for pure value (use abstraction) prevents precisely the understanding of the fundamental determination of capitalism, that is, the fact that constitutive social relations (wealth in a wide sense) are represented in a contradictory unit of materiality and social existence, use value and (exchange) value.

Let us sum up the points of contention we hold against Sohn-Rethel's ideas:

- (a) *The equiparation of any historical period* and the subsequent obscuring of the specific role of commodities in capitalist societies (and only in them), that is, wealth presents itself as an 'immense accumulation of commodities'. Such equiparation obscures the fact that commodities in capitalism are not mere surplus products, but a *representation* in objects of the social relations.
- (b) *Explaining the commodity-abstraction only in terms of exchange* and denying the importance of production and the mode of labor at its formation. This shift from production to exchange reduces the contradiction between concrete labor and abstract labor to a projection of the abstraction of use value, and therefore what disappears is the abstract quality of the real activity, what Marx called in his early work alienated labor (*entfremdete Arbeit*). We can add, then, that the real abstraction embodied in commodities happened before in the lives and bodies of concrete individuals, that is, in their active life and their vital activity.
- (c) *Changing the double form of commodities (value and use value) for pure value, or, in other terms, hiding the trade contradiction in the money form.* Not only is the materiality of commodities lost when ascribing the basis of real abstraction to the separation and abstraction of use value during exchange, the real quality of the contradiction between value and use value is reconverted into the juxtaposition of the *reality* of exchanging ('the social action') and the *ideality* of using ('the private minds') hidden in the circulation of money.

What we can notice now is that these three points in which Sohn-Rethel grows apart from Marx's thought are not casual. They are fundamental aspects in which Marx himself addresses the contradictory quality of reality under the hegemony of the commodity-form, that is, the trade gram-

mar. We also find that these three points constitute a unit. Commodities cannot only be understood as pure value, that is, as non-contradictory forms (reduction on subsumption of commodities to money) unless they are reduced to the moment of *exchange*, unless their contradictory form—private and social at once—of labor that produced them is hidden. Additionally, the moment of exchange cannot be considered fundamental unless commodities are regarded as mere surplus products, and so liable to be equated supra-historically to any other mode of production. If, in contrast to that, we consider that commodities are a representation of wealth, it is no longer possible to reduce it to the moment of exchange, it must include the historical form of labor that produced it. What has been pushed away from the understanding of real abstraction is contradiction. The movement underlying real contradiction has been substituted for the still picture of an idealized valorization, that is, for the reduction of commodities to exchange, money and value; but, more importantly, the wholeness of its grid, of the representation of wealth, has been dissolved.

It is still left for us to analyze the consequences of halting so the movement of contradiction into a picture of real abstraction. To do so, we shall review some aspects of how Marx's thought develops these problems of real contradiction.

THE CONTINUITY OF USE VALUE: THE COMMODITY-MONEY-CAPITAL METAMORPHOSIS

We have pointed out that Sohn-Rethel ascribes the basis of real abstraction to the abstraction of use value during exchange. Commodities enter the exchange with a double quality of value and use value, but in that material practice, its use value undergoes abstraction; in other words, individuals deal with them *materially* as if they were only value; use value remains confined to the interior of the buyer's mind, not surfacing in the practical reality. Therefore, with regard to that activity, the role of use value is no longer real, it is only ideal. Abstraction would then be the act through which use value undergoes abstraction, or is put aside, outside practical reality and reduced to a mere element in the buyer's mind. It is in this aspect that Sohn-Rethel radically departs from Marx's understanding of exchange. Fundamentally because, for Marx, it is the *metamorphosis* of commodities into money. It is the real, not merely ideal, transit between two extremes: the commodity (value and use value) and money (represent-

tation of pure value). But because of the same reason, this transit presupposes asserting the point of departure as well as the arrival.

Of commodities, Marx says, ‘Its property of being a value not only can but must achieve an existence different from its natural one’. From the start, we are facing two orders of the existence of commodities. However, it is not merely different, complementary aspects, profiles that coexist in succession, but, on the contrary, it is a contradiction: ‘each commodity must be qualitatively different from its own value [this is use value]. Its value must therefore have an existence which is qualitatively distinguishable from it [money], and in actual exchange this separability must become a real separation [real abstraction], because the natural distinctness of commodities must come into contradiction with their economic equivalence’ (MEW 42: 76; Marx 2007: 66).

The double existence of commodities ‘must become a real separation’, that is, the *contradiction* between use value and value culminates in the annihilation of the self-same relation: the terms must separate. This separation, however, is not possible in the commodity closed in itself. How is it possible, then? In the relation that each commodity supposes with the others. That relation is expressed in an ideal mode in the exchange value as a price, that is, a sum of money and, in a real mode, in the conversion of commodities into money. So, the contradiction between use value and value is transferred to the mediation of money. What takes place in this shift is that the contradiction inherent to any commodity finds resolution in its relation to the rest of the commodities through money (which is, *really*, particular money, but at the same time, it is *ideally* the universal representation¹⁷ of all commodities). The contradiction then moves from an individual commodity to money in general as the general form of contradiction. Finally, the abstraction of use value occurs, as Sohn-Rethel says, but now we understand that exchange is only a moment, and so is real abstraction. Marx says:

Every moment, in calculating, accounting etc., that we transform commodities into value symbols, we fix them as mere exchange values, making abstraction from the matter they are composed of and all their natural qualities. On paper, **in the head**, this metamorphosis proceeds by means of **mere abstraction**; but in the **real exchange process** a real *mediation* is required, **a means to accomplish this abstraction**. In its natural existence, with its natural properties, in natural identity with itself, the commodity is neither constantly exchangeable nor exchangeable against *every other commodity*;

this it is only as something different from itself, something distinct from itself, as exchange value. (Idem: 66; 76)

We can identify two moments underlying exchange, a first one in which there is contradiction within the commodity (contradiction between use value and value) and a second one in which the commodity becomes money. What is fundamental is that such commodity metamorphosis does not resolve the contradiction; it is transferred to the second instance, the money. That is why money must move non-stop, because the contradiction is never resolved but deferred: always redirected from one sphere to another. The total movement in the transit of the contradiction presupposes the presence of materiality, that is, of use value, because it is the origin of the objectified labor. The labor contradictory in itself (abstract and concrete) is objectified in a product with use value and value, the metamorphosis of that commodity into money manages to *separate* (abstract) the value from its material support. But the abstraction is merely a moment, given that money itself must also undergo metamorphosis, that is, become capital, which will in turn be imbued in the contradiction that money inherited from the commodity, now as the contradiction between living and dead labor. And this contradiction will also be deferred by the restarting cycle, although it will be at a more developed level, that is, of a greater accumulation. The total meaning of the contradiction deferral is the process of valorization of capital. Capital must, then, start Sisyphus' task over and over again: buying labor force (variable capital) so that living labor is objectified into commodities (use value), which in the exchange process are converted into money with which to extract and obtain surplus-value. The aim of the whole metamorphosis cycle is the accumulation of value, that is, capital. But this is only possible through the inseparable chain of production, exchange and consume (productive or not), that is, through the whole unending process of *capital-labor-commodity-money-accumulated capital* metamorphosis. The difference between *capital* and *accumulated capital* is the degree of value accumulation.

This allows us to understand that these metamorphoses are but the quintessential meaning of commodities in capitalism: the possibility of wealth (capacities of the bodies, needs, pleasures, social relations and relation to nature, etc.) presenting itself as a monstrous cumulus of things: the 'immense accumulation of commodities'. And this is the specificity of capitalism that precisely makes impossible to ascribe the basis of real abstraction to the moment of exchange and value, disregarding produc-

tion and consumption as well as use value (during the exchange). To sum up, Sohn-Rethel's approach does not allow relating the real abstraction with the process of valorization. Precisely, this is so because that process is not a simple abstraction, but a real contradiction, which is only possible due to the vertiginous, repeating escape from itself (metamorphosis) that the commodity—or its total form, the capital—undergoes.

DEFERRAL AND MYSTERY: THE ACCUMULATION OF COMMODITIES

From the inseparable quality of the moments of production, exchange and consumption¹⁸ in the existence of capitalist commodities, we have reached to the need for continuity of the use value, one of the moments in the metamorphosis of commodities into money. Then we understood that such metamorphosis is but one moment in the metamorphosis process that goes from labor to accumulation of capital and restarts non-stop. These metamorphoses are the real, possible form of the contradiction, which, should it not be deferred, would make the system impossible. What we had noticed up to now, however, was that contradiction taken as a whole is precisely the representation of wealth; in other words, the representation under the commodity-form (trade grammar) of all the relationships of human individuals with themselves, one another and with nature.

The existence of capital as a process of valorization is the correlation of a continuous deferral of contradiction, always about to find resolution and always deferred. The mediation of one extreme and the other is the metamorphosis, which restarts the process. Let us re-state it: the contradiction between wage labor and capital is not resolved but displaced in production (which is also consumption) as concrete labor and abstract labor to the determination of commodities, that is, their use value and value. And this contradiction will be deferred again as it transforms in the exchange of commodities for money, whose contradiction is underlaid by its particular and yet general quality of its existence (money represents any commodity in general, but only can be exchanged by a particularity; it represents, at the same time, the public and private qualities of the labor of the commodity-producer). And, as expected, the contradiction of money is also deferred in the metamorphosis of money into capital, which in turn becomes constant capital (means) and variable capital (labor). The cycle restarts then, but it is not circular, but an expansive spiral, or, in other words, accumulation.

Nevertheless, it could be argued that, as it is continually deferred, the contradiction is not real but a mere abstraction; the re-representation, the repetition, of a contradiction forever to come. If we have asserted the real quality of the contradiction, on what grounds do we claim its reality? Where does the contradiction lie, beyond the metamorphoses? Simply, in the *total form* of this dynamics, in other words, in the complete circuit *initial capital—wage labor—commodity—money—accumulated capital*.¹⁹ This complete circuit is the representation of wealth under the commodity-form, or, better still, the expanding representation of the social bonds (with oneself, others and nature) under the form of the trade metamorphosis, that is, its grammar. The necessary expansion of the cycle presupposes that, progressively, all human relations must fall under the trade form.

The contradiction of the capitalist mode of production manages to be avoided at any particular moment, but this is not so in the general movement. Therefore, the contradiction is equal to the complete movement of the metamorphoses, that is, to capital as a whole: that immense accumulation of commodities. The contradiction is the global total capital, its existence itself. The deferral of such contradiction is what comes to the capital in its compulsory, non-stop accumulation, that is, its growth. And so, not unlike the sharks that cannot stop swimming not even to sleep for fear of drowning, capital cannot stop growing, that is, accumulating because otherwise its constitutive contradiction would catch up. When the movement of capital partially stops, what also happens is the partial destruction of the productive forces, in other words, the contradiction has caught up with the capital. The mystery of the growth of capital is the need to run away from itself. This contradiction is what is called a crisis. But in those crises is also at stake the destruction of the lives of those individuals who maintain (or are) those contradictory relations.

FROM TRIVIALITY TO THE DANCING TABLE: THE COHERENCE OF CONTRADICTION

Up to here, we have only seen one perspective on the problem of the articulation between bodies and meanings, or between materiality and ideality. It presented itself to us under the guise of a real contradiction of the 'objective' type, whose vortex was capital and its form the commodity. However, the same transit Could be traced from the point of view of the subjective forms that correspond to the real contradiction, that is, to the

mode in which the contradiction is inscribed onto the interrelated individuals as an articulation of their bodies and meaning.²⁰ In his conflict against dualisms, Marx envisaged early how inseparable the ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ poles were. He writes in the *1844 Manuscripts*: ‘The worker is the subjective manifestation of the fact that capital is man wholly lost to himself, just as capital is the objective manifestation of the fact that labour is man lost to himself’ (MEW 40: 523; Marx 1982: 606). Both aspects, the subjective and the objective one, are intimately entwined.

The contradiction, to be possible—and therefore real—must go unnoticed in its ‘objective’ as well as ‘subjective’ aspects. The condition for its deferral to be circulation movement is that at no time must the contradiction be apprehended as such. As *objectively*, the contradiction is hidden and deferred by the metamorphoses of circulation, also *subjectively* it must be avoided. This means that an experience of contradiction must not be lived. How is that possible? Provided that the metamorphoses that avoid contradiction are but the form of wealth, the metamorphoses are its interrelations, human actions. Therefore, this contradiction that appears on the outside must previously (i.e. in the formation of every human subject) be a contradiction constitutive of the self. León Rozitchner claimed that for a fetishism of commodities to be possible, there should be first a fetishism of the subject. Consequently, subjects are isomorphic to commodities. Their constitutive separation is coherent with the separation that orders the contradictory planes of commodities.

It would seem that at this point we go back to Sohn-Rethel’s approach, but this is not so when examined closely. According to him, real abstraction, which is the commodity-form, is the basis of the abstract mode of thinking. What we have pointed out here is in order that the contradiction be real, it must be based on a coherence. This coherence consists in the fact that the subjective and objective contradictions are two sides of the same movement, which manages to avoid in every single one of its stages the contradiction, but which entails it in its complete form.

From this perspective, to Marx, one of the fundamental characteristics of commodities is that their existence, or better still, their *experience*, takes place in the immediacy as something trivial: our dealings with commodities are by no means strange, we flesh them out. Only analysis will later show us their theological traces and metaphysical subtleties. And then chairs stand on their legs and start dancing. But this only happens in the especial attitude of analysis; in contrast, in everyday life, tables and other commodities remain exasperatingly still. We deal with commodities daily

and to us they seem to be shrouded in no mystery (MEW 23 1962: 85; Marx 2009: 87). In this ‘triviality’ of commodities, there is the ultimate form of the entwining contradictions we have here discussed; for this ‘triviality’ is nothing but the manifestation of the profound coherence that exists between the subjective and objective contradictions, different aspects of a single separation. The section about commodity fetishism may be the most correct protocol for this point of reunion and articulation between the subjective and the objective.

This article was translated by Sol Golzman.

NOTES

1. This is a traditional Western topic. Among its most famous expressions, there is the Aristotle’s founding classic (Aristotle 1982) *Organon* and Kant’s approaches with Kant (2003) in which contradiction has been relegated to the ideal and also to the limit of its decomposition. As the impossibility of the real. In a manner radically different from tradition, Freud states that negation does not exist in the unconscious, but that it arises from an action from which the conscious and the ego emerge (Freud 1992: 249–250), Sartre (1993) claims in *Being and Nothingness* that negation depends on nothingness, which is only possible because of the human attitude of interrogation, in other words, a nihilization of the being-in-itself produced by the being-for-itself.
2. That is, the Basic forms of the logic principles, as those of *identity, non-contradiction, excluded middle* and so on.
3. Evidently, this does not mean that for Marx there is no logical contradiction; on the contrary, as Hegel does, Marx conceives the existence of another kind of contradiction, which allows broadening knowledge.
4. As there is in Foucault, a paradoxical follower of Marx’s position with regard to idealism and nominalism, Deleuze and Guattari develop in a similar way to Marx the relationship between bodies and meanings. See Deleuze and Guattari (2002).
5. It may be that the explicative power of Foucault’s concept over Marx’s is due to the former is a developed form of what in the latter is merely an intuition.
6. This broadened reality has been attempted in several ways, among them surrealism and psychoanalysis have been very fruitful. Walter Benjamin envisaged their possibilities as he suggested that revolutionary art would be that which managed to ‘win the energies of drunkenness for the revolution’ (Benjamin 2007: 313).

7. For an analysis of the notion of reality in Marx, see Henry (1976: 280–401).
8. On the problem of consciousness in young Marx, it is fundamental to the early work of León Rozitchner on the 1844 manuscripts, *La negación de la conciencia pura en la filosofía de Marx* (Rozitchner 2015: 99–138).
9. ‘The pivot of the argument lies with the structural form of social being, or, more precisely, with the formal characteristics attaching to commodity production and to the social synthesis arising from it’ (Sohn-Rethel 1980: 8).
10. See also Thomson (1975).
11. For this work, we take the Spanish version of *Wenceslao Roces*, which in this as in other cases has more occurrence than translation. Marx’s text says ‘ungeheure Warensammlung’ (MEW 23 1962: 49), which literally is ‘monstrous set of merchandise’; closer to the text, Pedro Scaron translates ‘enormous accumulation of merchandise’ (Marx 2010: 43). But although the version of Roces is not very faithful to the text, we believe that the occurrence ‘immense arsenal’ expresses Marx’s image much better than the soberer version of ‘enormous ensemble’.
12. ‘In the ancient Asiatic and other ancient modes of production, we find that the conversion of products into commodities, and therefore the conversion of men into producers of commodities, holds a subordinate place, which, however, increases in importance as the primitive communities approach nearer and nearer to their dissolution. Trading nations, properly so called, exist in the ancient world only in its interstices, like the gods of Epicurus in the Intermundia, or like Jews in the pores of Polish society. Those ancient social organisms of production are, as compared with bourgeois society, extremely simple and transparent. But they are founded either on the immature development of man individually, who has not yet severed the umbilical cord that unites him with his fellowmen in a primitive tribal community, or upon direct relations of subjection’ (MEW 23 1962: 93; Marx 2010: 96–97). ‘The distinction between a society where this form is dominant, permeating every expression of life, and a society where it only makes an episodic appearance is essentially one of quality. For depending on which is the case, all the subjective phenomena in the societies concerned are objectified in qualitatively different ways’ (Lukács 1969: 90–91).
13. Evidently, Marx deals with the core of this problem in the section *the Fetishism of Commodities*. For a more detailed analysis, see Sucksdorf (2012).
14. It is evident that not even the most developed financial speculation can hold such an outline without going through the real metamorphosis M-C at some point.

15. On the phantom-like quality of capitalism, there are contributions as diverse as fruitful. Among the most remarkable (some of them classics), we could mention Walter Benjamin's (2004), Jacques Derrida (1998) or León Rozitchner (2011) (*Materialismo ensoñado*, Buenos Aires, Tinta limón).
16. And this is so not because wealth *is* a monstrous accumulation of commodities in the societies in which a capitalism mode of production rules, but because this is how it *presents* (*erscheint*) itself.
17. 'As a value, the commodity is general; as a real commodity it is particular. As a value it is always exchangeable; in real exchange it is exchangeable only if it fulfills particular conditions' (MEW 42: 76; Marx 2007: 66).
18. It is well known that Marx deals in detail with the co-continuity of production, exchange and consumption in *Einleitung* (1857).
19. This is evidently a simplified diagram of the logical stops of the circuit, given that, for example, the relation between capital and wage labor is also a trade exchange: labor force being a commodity exchanged for money.
20. In this path, we have followed another work, still unpublished, based fundamentally on the concept of generic being (*Gattungswesen*) as the articulation between bodies and meaning.

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Reification and Real Abstraction in Marx's Critique of Political Economy

Ingo Elbe

In light of an increasing uncontrollable capitalist mode of production that almost completely takes hold of individuals, Marx's concepts of reification and 'real abstraction' possess a factually justified currency, which has been reflected in German social-philosophical debates of the last few years.¹

The concept of reification was considerably shaped in the philosophical discourse by Georg Lukács (1970) and the reception of his book *History and Class Consciousness*. However, Lukács only takes up Marx's theories in an unsystematic way, also mixing them with socio-ontological assumptions from the Hegelian tradition as well as culture-critical content from the sociology of Max Weber (rationalization theory) and Georg Simmel (abstraction theory), without Lukács verifying their commensurability with Marx's approach. Moreover, in Lukács' work, the theoretical levels of the diagnosis of reification found in Marx's work are not clearly

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distinguished and related to each other, so that fundamental categories of value theory (abstract labor, the commodity form, the fetish character of the commodity) merge unchecked with the concept of the real subsumption of the labor process under capital (rationalization, standardization, machine-aided division of labor, the de-qualification of labor-power). Ultimately, Lukács subsumes various matters, namely the real process of objectification and its ideological processing, under a single concept—that of reification. This had fatal consequences for the entire history of the reception of the term, since this conceptual diffuseness, paired with a Hegelian metaphysics of spirit, led to an idealist (all social interrelations are mental things) and an irrational social ontology (social interrelations under capitalism are logically contradictory). The topos of real abstraction is essentially mentioned in the work of Alfred Sohn-Rethel. I will not go into his equally questionable misappropriation of Marx's categories for epistemological ends,² but rather demonstrate that the idea of a 'real abstraction' consummated in the act of exchange is a central theoretical aspect of Marx's analysis of reification.

In the following, I briefly present central motifs of Marx's original concepts of reification and real abstraction, advocate for clear conceptual differentiation with regard to real differing issues, and finally highlight irrationalist models of reception of Marx's concept of reification, as they can be found in the debate in Germany following Lukács and Adorno, in particular, and also the work of Lucio Colletti (1977), which is very influential in Germany.

Although Marx only rarely uses the term explicitly, the circumstances it describes are central to his work and are also addressed in concepts such as objectification (*Versachlichung*), alienation (*Entfremdung*), inversion (*Verkehrung*), mystification and fetishism. This conceptual field, which at first appears unwieldy, nevertheless, has a clear systematic structure in Marx's mature critique of political economy from 1857 on essentially (1) the real reification and autonomous status of social relations in capitalism and, (2) arising from this, the ideological reification (fetishization, mystification) of these relations as natural characteristics of things or universal-historical social patterns have to be distinguished. In the following, I explicate these levels on the basis of a few basic concepts of value theory, leading to the following thesis: according to Marx, value as a historically specific form of socialization of the products of private, isolated productive units is an *objectively mediated* relation of production *represented in objects*

(ad 1) which incorrectly appears to be an intrinsic property of these objects (ad 2). Marx's concept of reification thus addresses the domination of objectively mediated capitalist relations of production over people and the spontaneous ideological safeguarding of this domination, both of which he considers worthy of criticism.

‘ALIENATION’: REIFICATION AS REAL OBJECTIFICATION AND AUTONOMIZATION OF MATERIAL REPRODUCTION

Already in the year 1844, Marx diagnosed the ‘society of private property’ as ‘the complete domination of the estranged thing’ (Marx and Engels 2010a: 221). Without yet being able to explain this domination, recurring motifs of the real objectification of the relations of production and their socio-psychological and ethical consequences are thematized—in the late work as well—primarily under the concept of alienation:

- the domination of capital over the entire process of production and the subordination of all human aims to the goal of producing profit (idem: 220–222);
- treating other human beings as mere means to the end of the competitive, market-mediated and objectified recognition of needs and services—only the ‘language of commodities’ is understandable to market participants; they have to be indifferent to non-paying needs (idem: 226 ff.);
- the internalization of an external-appropriative relationship to things and human beings—the sense of proprietary ownership takes the place of the appropriation of things in the course of formative processes (idem: 300);
- treating one’s own productive potentials as things, as mere means to the end of animal self-preservation (idem: 309); and
- the false anthropologization of the alienated form of labor as labor ‘as such’—reification in the sense of an ideological phenomenon (on this, see point 2) (idem: 217, 270f.).

In his later works, Marx then attempts to explain by means of value theory how this dynamic of objectification and autonomization of capitalism emerges.

THE CONSTITUTION OF ‘VALUE OBJECTIVITY’ THROUGH
‘REAL ABSTRACTION’

Marx’s central insights consists first of all in the fact that in all modes of production based on the division of labor, labor has the function of satisfying social needs, but only under private conditions with a division of labor, which imply systematic exchange relations, which have the additional social function of creating a social nexus—that is to say, of relating concrete-useful acts of labor to each other. This function of labor, according to Marx, cannot be carried out in its concrete form, but only in its property of being labor as such—as *abstract labor*. As such, it represents the common element that makes the exchange of qualitatively different goods possible.³ Thus, in capitalism, we are dealing with the socialization of concrete labor by abstract labor, whereas in all previous modes of production, acts of labor and their products are socially recognized through direct force or social norms (Postone 1993: 149 ff.). Marx notes ‘It follows from the preceding not that there are two differing kinds of labour lurking in the commodity, but rather that the *same* labour is specified in differing and even contradictory manner’ (MEGA II/5 1983: 26)—a socially unspecific regard as concrete labor, and in a socially specific regard as abstract labor. In *private* social relations with a division of labor, producers first enter into contact with one another in a mediated way via the exchange of their products, thus in a manner mediated by objects: ‘The individuals confront each other only as proprietors of exchange values, as such individuals who have given themselves reified being for each other through their product, the commodity. Without this objective mediation, they have no relation to each other’ (Marx and Engels 2010b: 467 ff.).

The socialization of their own labor thus confronts human beings in the form of a social relationship between things; their social unity confronts them autonomously as the attribute of the value of their products of labor. Marx writes of ‘objective [sachliche] relations between persons and social relations between things’ (corrected translation of Marx 1976: 166). Abstract labor and value constitute the social unity of acts of labor and products under the condition and with the consequence of their systematic dissociation as private acts of labor and products.⁴

Value objectivity is only given to commodities within this specific social relation between things; it is a relational attribute, since, according to Marx, no good is a commodity in itself:

none is for itself *value objectivity as such* [...] outside of their relationship to each other—the relationship in which they are equal—neither the coat nor the linen possess *value objectivity* or their *objectivity* as mere congelations of human labor as such. They only possess this social objectivity as a social relationship

keines für sich solche Werthgegenständlichkeit [...]. Ausserhalb ihrer Beziehung auf einander—der Beziehung, worin sie gleichgelten—besitzen weder der Rock noch die Leinwand Werthgegenständlichkeit oder ihre Gegenständlichkeit als blosser Gallerten menschlicher Arbeit schlechthin. Diese gesellschaftliche Gegenständlichkeit besitzen sie [...] nur als gesellschaftliche Beziehung. (MEGA II/6 1987: 30)

The process of exchange, however, is the only real social relationship of the products to each other as commodities:

The reduction of various concrete private acts of labor to this abstraction of equal human labor is only carried out through exchange, which in fact equates products of different acts of labor with each other.

Die Reduction der verschiednen konkreten Privatarbeiten auf dieses Abstractum gleicher menschlicher Arbeit vollzieht sich nur durch den Austausch, welcher Producte verschiedner Arbeiten thatsächlich einander gleichsetzt. (Idem: 41; Marx 1976: 166)

In another work, Marx describes this ‘reduction’ to an ‘abstraction’ as a ‘real (...) abstraction’ (Marx and Engels 2010b: 272), which is not a subjective mental act on the part of human beings, but rather an ‘objective equalisation of unequal quantities of labour forcibly brought about by the social process’ (idem: 299). Prior to this real abstraction mediated by exchange, products—however much they are aimed at exchange—are, according to Marx, private products and the labor that goes into them is private labor (see MEGA II/5 1983: 41); labor within the immediate process of production is thus not abstract labor in the sense of value theory.

However, the relationship of things to each other does not originate from the things themselves and does not originate from their physical properties, that is, it is not a natural relationship. Rather, they are placed in relation to one another by people under specific conditions of the socialization of their labor. It is first this that turns ‘goods’ into ‘things of value’. In this relation, the recognition of private acts of labor as socially general labor occurs in an objectively mediated and unconscious way. ‘Objectively mediated’ means that the recognition of the concrete acts of

labor of private producers as socially useful activity asserts itself as an attribute of the products of labor and consists in an objective act of reduction of their concrete acts of labor to labor as such. ‘Unconscious’ refers to the non-knowledge of this process on the part of commodity owners (‘They do this without being aware of it’ (Marx 1976: 166 ff.), not to internal psychological unconsciousness).

Thus, in capitalism, the socialization of products of labor takes on a specific form—value objectivity. This objectivity is a ‘*socially practiced relation of validity*’ (Heinrich 1994: 60), whereas use value represents the ‘material’ content of wealth. That is to say, use value comprises a natural substrate which is reshaped in the concrete labor process within the framework of applicable natural laws according to specific human aims, and with the intention of satisfying specific human needs. In contrast, value objectivity exists in the *relation of products of labor as mere products of human labor as such* within the exchange process, thus there ‘substance’ is the relating of acts of labor to each other in the same act as human labor as such.⁵ Abstract labor as the substance of value and value as a relation of social validity have thereby two ‘non-relational’ attributes as bearers: *first*, concrete labor (‘expenditure of brains, muscle, nerves’ in the interaction with a specific piece of nature) and its product, use value, as well as *second*, abstract labor as a nominal abstraction (as the fact, ascertained by the theorist, that every concrete act of labor possesses the attribute of being human labor as such).

- (1) Concrete acts of labor/use value are thus *first* non-relational attributes and bearers of relational attributes. Use value (and the concrete labor that constitutes it) is also a relation—the usefulness of objects for human beings or as concrete labor, the socially mediated reshaping of nature in order to make natural objects appropriate to human ends. But first, this usefulness cannot be thought without objective attributes, which is why Marx speaks of ‘natural material’ (with regard to concrete labor: not without concrete forms of activity, e.g. tailoring, and a real relation to natural objects, e.g. cloth), and secondly, it is not dependent upon *specific* social relations that use value as such (or the relation of concrete labor) exists—it exists in all human societies. Of course, use values and

their manners of use also have their history, but one can sit on a chair whether it was created under feudalism or capitalism. According to Marx, 'not an atom of matter' (Marx 1976: 138) enters into the attribute of value or the substance of value, and it constitutes a *historically specific* social relationship—under feudal relations of production, for example, it is not the equality of acts of labor that constitutes the nexus of material reproduction.

- (2) Abstract labor, as a general attribute ascertained by means of nominal abstraction, is *secondly* the bearer of abstract labor as the substance of value, because, in order to be *related to each other* in the process of exchange as products of human labor as such (i.e. to have value), products of labor must also, independently of this relation, be products of labor. Abstract labor as a nominal abstraction is therefore in this sense non-relational.

If, in contrast to the theoretical definition of labor (nominal abstraction) of labor of human labor as such, in the case of abstract labor as the substance of value, there is talk of 'real abstraction' (Sohn-Rethel 1973: 38), this does not mean, however, that the attribute of 'human labor as such' grasped with the nominal abstraction does not really exist or *only* exists in the mind of the theorist until the 'reduction' to abstract-human labor is consummated in exchange. It merely implies that in order to establish the social nexus between private-isolated acts of labor in exchange, the general property fixed by abstraction—which also exists independently of exchange as a real property of all concrete acts of labor (is not merely 'flatus vocis')—in a specific manner *obtains significance*⁶ that it did not already have independently of exchange, and which is not consciously-conventionally ascribed to it by those engaging in exchange, but rather is constituted by the social nexus of the objective relationship between people.⁷ *Real* abstraction means that the general attribute of acts of labor of being human labor as such, in and through exchange, obtains—without the conscious intervention of those engaging in exchange—the specific significance of being the social form of private acts of labor. The elementary constitution of wealth is accordingly determined by Marx to be a process that is repeated in everyday life in which individuals as 'mental systems' represent only its 'environment'.

‘THE LANGUAGE OF COMMODITIES’: THE MATERIAL
REPRESENTATION OF THE OBJECTIVITY OF VALUE
IN THE FORMS OF VALUE

In exchange, things signify something about their physical attributes and their usefulness to human needs, which also belong to them independently therefrom, going beyond. But ‘commodities are things. What they are, they must be objectively or demonstrate in their own objective relationships’ (MEGA II/5 1983: 30). The substance of value and value must necessarily appear in order to regulate the social metabolism. The social quality of commodity things, their value, however, can only be expressed in the sensuous objectivity of every *other* commodity, which is due not only to the purely social manner of existence of value but also to the specific mode of expression of the social quality of objects:

Since the value of the individual commodity cannot appear in any medium distinct from its use value (the commodity is a dead object that has no gestures, no language, etc.), its value cannot appear at all in its own body. The commodity cannot be grasped as the social distinct from its use value, but rather solely as use value. If the commodity must appear as value, and if it cannot do so in any medium other than that of use value, then the commodity can only appear in a use value that is distinct from its own. (Wolf 1985: 118)

The objects or services exchanged possess, as Marx expresses metaphorically, the ‘language of commodities’ (Marx 1976: 143), since the expression of value is not consciously induced by the participants in exchange. A further stage in the autonomization of value is thus rooted in the fact of the representation of the sociality of things in (ultimately) an excluded commodity which is regarded as the objective form of existence of this sociality—so that one can carry around the social nexus and participation in social wealth in one’s trouser pocket, but just as well also lose it (Marx 1973: 157, 221 ff.).

In the *form of value*, as Marx names this relation of representation, value, an unconscious and invisible product of the social metabolism, obtains a sensuous-objective independence: through the representation of the value of Commodity A in the use value of Commodity B (e.g. that ‘20 yards of linen are worth a coat’) there emerges a ‘unification’ of the value of the first commodity with the use value of the second commodity—

which must be distinguished from the attribute of both commodities being unities of use value and value. The natural form of B (e.g. coat) *counts* as the form of value of A in this relation. In doing so, the value (of A) is not transformed into the use value (of B) nor is use value (of B) transformed into value (of A). The form of value 'x commodity A is worth y commodity B' is a polar opposition. Its poles are reflective determinations, that is to say, attributes that they only have within their relationship to each other and are to be distinguished from common causal relations (Hegel 1999: #258 ff.; Esfeld 2002: 22 ff.).

Value and value form are regarded by Marx as stages of the autonomization of the social form of labor in capitalism from concrete acts of labor and the commodity owners. Thus a central meaning of the early concept of alienation, the 'domination of the thing' or 'wealth as an utterly alien power' (MECW 3 2010a: 315) is deciphered from the starting point of the concept of abstract labor. In this sense, reification proves to be a form of alienation specific to capitalism (Wallat 2009: 79). The social nexus of acts of labor accordingly consists in capitalism not as a personal normatively mediated one. According to Marx, the form of wealth, value, is constituted as a specific social relationship of validity through initial conditions structured by a private division of labor, and the social recognition of products of labor through the mediation of exchange. This first form of the autonomization in the form of value of people own social bond was further conceptually pursued in the form of value as the second stage of autonomization. Here now, the social nexus, 'social power' literally carried in one's trouser pocket, can become 'the private power of private persons' (Marx 1976: 230), since the socially general form value is ultimately represented by the simple and unified form of value of money. Money as the measure of value and means of circulation becomes autonomous with regard to all other commodities, which are therefore only regarded as specific use values, whereas only money counts as value as such.

With the movement from value to money, Marx also claims proof that commodities and money stand in a 'inner necessary connection' (MEGA II/5 1983: 43). This has decisive significance for his concept of socialization as abstract labor as a nexus of autonomization: money is for Marx *first of all* neither a natural attribute of a thing nor a conventional product to facilitate natural exchange relations. Rather, it is the expression of a form of socialization mediated by things that has been wrested from the control of participants. Markets, according to Marx, can *second of all* only be thought of as being mediated by money. Thus the possibility of crisis is

already inherent to the concept of the market. Marx demonstrates that in order to sell, one does not have to buy at the same time, which enables a friction of the economic process (Marx 1976: 208 ff.). *Third of all*, money is thus for Marx also not a harmless ‘medium’ of an economy supposedly geared to ‘satisfying needs’ because value as the ‘medium’ of the social metabolism takes on a life of its own with regard to commodities in further stages and thus transforms from a means to the end of exchange: in money as money, value also takes on a life of its own with regard to its vanishing functions as measure of value and means of circulation. The form of circulation commodity-money-commodity is replaced by that of money-commodity-money. But with that, value has not yet truly become autonomous. It cannot do so in the objective form of money as a horde or world money. First, as a process, that is, as capital, does value become autonomous at a final stage, in the form of ‘M-C-M’, namely as value that is maintained and at the same time increased through a specific class-divided productive relationship. Capital is thereby a qualitatively and quantitatively ‘limitless’ (idem: 253) (materially tautological: money-money) process of the appropriation of ‘wealth in the abstract’ (idem: 254), the reified form of the social nexus of private products. The objective ‘aim’ of capital is the *expansion* of value *as such*, which has no limit beyond expansion. Since capital is a *process* of the increase of value, it must, in order to remain capital, constantly—that is to say, endlessly—continue this process (Heinrich 2013: 106 ff.). The competition-mediated social nexus of capital production forces individual capitals to constant accumulation under penalty of going under (Marx 1976: 381, 739).

REIFICATION AS AN IDEOLOGICAL PHENOMENON:
FETISHIZATION AND MYSTIFICATION OF REALLY OBJECTIFIED
RELATIONS OF PRODUCTION

According to Marx, the existence of forms of value is also associated with the pitfalls of fetishism, which indicate an ideological mixture of (first) nature and ‘culture’: the fact that social relations between private owners are represented by things means first of all that these relations appear to market actors as ‘thing-like in volume [...]’ (Brentel 1989: 287) in representational form, in the form of manifestations of value not conceived as such: value appears in gold as money or in means of production as capital. These forms of appearance are a real movement of the whole, the

perception of which first becomes false without reference to its hidden context of justification and referral (Brentel 1989: 285).⁸ Forms of appearance of value are correctly perceived, but falsely related to each other, in that causal or ontological interrelations that are not empirically graspable (Marx speaks of a 'mediated' 'process' that 'vanishes in its own result, leaving no trace behind' (Marx 1976: 187)) cannot be mentally reproduced.⁹ When Marx speaks explicitly of 'reification' (Marx 1981: 969, 1020), he means these forms of misrecognition which are also referred to as 'fetishisms' or 'mystifications'. According to him, they constitute not only a religion of everyday life (idem: 969); as 'objective forms of thought', they also constitute the 'categories of bourgeois economy' (Marx 1976: 169). The entirety of Marx's *Capital* now reconstructs, beginning with the fetish character of the commodity, an increasingly complex sequence of stages of mystification of the real relations of production (the fetishism of money and capital, the mystification of the wage form, the fetishism of interest, etc.).

However, in the concept of fetish in *Capital*, Marx pulls together the critique of two phenomena—the critique of the misrecognizing naturalization of social relations suggested by the objectification and autonomization of the social nexus, and the critique of this objectification and autonomization of relations itself.¹⁰ This has caused grandiose confusion in the reception of Marx's work, especially against the background of an irrationalist Hegelian social ontology attributed to Marx—is the fetish a phenomenon of consciousness or not? Is capitalist reality 'wrong per se' or only its perception? Thus a number of interpreters¹¹ have claimed that Marx conceives of the commodity itself as a fetish and thus assumes that as a use value, it has attributes that it cannot have at all as a use value, that it is a mystery, since a fetish is something that has properties attributed to it that it does not have at all. Use value is thus use value and yet not use value, namely value, at the same time and in the same regard. Also popular in connection with this is the assumption that all of these contradictions are real contradictions of an 'untrue' or 'inherently false reality' which cannot be comprehended by common scientific methods. But that is not Marx's thesis. According to him, the commodity is use value in a socially unspecified regard, and value in a specific regard; it has the latter attribute as a *relational* attribute which is not a mystery and which it only has under conditions of private production with a division of labor. What is mysterious is solely the idea, suggested by the objective representation of the value of one product in the use value of another, that this value is inherent

to it as a natural, material attribute. However, the mentioned irrationalist interpretations (e.g. Colletti, Jappe, Grigat) or interpretations demonstrating irrationalism in Marx's work (e.g. Iorio) might refer to a misleading statement by Marx, in which he suggests that value is a fetish. It is as follows:

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time supra-sensible or social. (Marx 1976: 164)

Of course, it is not through this substitution, that is to say through this *misunderstanding*, this *mix-up*,¹² that products of labor become commodities. They become commodities because they are created under private relations of production with a division of labor and mediated by the form of the market. If, as Marx clearly states, the commodity form is the *source* of the mystification ('Whence, then, arises the enigmatic character of the product of labour, as soon as it assumes the form of a commodity? Clearly, it arises from this form itself' (idem: 164)),¹³ then it cannot be the mystification that makes the products of labor into commodities ('through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities'). So one has to take the confusion of recipients seriously and at the same time establish that it's nonsense to apply the same category to two interrelated but separate states of affairs. All questions concerning an 'ontological' or 'epistemological' character of the fetish concept are simply dissolved if one uses the concept of alienation for the critique of real autonomization, and the concept of fetish for the cognitive effects of the same.¹⁴

This article was translated by Alex Locascio.

NOTES

1. See Honneth (2005), Wallat (2009), Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie (2011), Bitterolf and Maier (2012), Friesen and Lotz (2012).
2. See Sohn-Rethel (1973: 38). For a critique of Sohn-Rethel, see Reichardt (2008).

3. I cannot deal further here with the considerable problems caused by this thought in Marx's theoretical frame of reference, in particular with regard to the mediation of the quality and the quantity of the determination of value. See Elbe (2010: 261–263) as well as Ellmers (2016).
4. 'As use values or goods, commodities are *corporeally distinct* things. Their *existence as value*, in contrast, constitutes their *unity*. This unity does not originate in nature, but rather in society' (MEGA II/5: 19). Things are similar with regard to the 'substance' of value: 'As useful activity directed to the appropriation of natural factors in one form or another, labour is a natural condition of human existence, a condition of material interchange between man and nature, quite independent of the form of society. On the other hand, the labour which posits exchange value is a specific social form of labour. For example, tailoring if one considers its physical aspect as a distinct productive activity produces a coat, but not the exchange value of the coat. The exchange value is produced by it not as tailoring as such but as abstract universal labour, and this belongs to a social framework not devised by the tailor' (Marx and Engels 2010b: 278).
5. See: 'by equating their different products to each other in exchange as values, they equate their different kinds of labour as human labour' (Marx 1976: 166).
6. 'Tailoring and weaving' both 'therefore possess the general property of being human labour, and they therefore have to be considered in certain cases, such as the production of value, solely from this point of view' (Marx 1976: 150). 'In every social form of labor, individual acts of labor of different individuals are also related to each other as human labor, but here, this *relationship itself* counts as the *specific social form* of the acts of labor' (MEGA II/5 1983: 41).
7. See: 'The validation of concern here is neither one agreed upon by those engaging in exchange, nor imposed by the state. Rather, it is a relation structurally given in an economy based upon exchange' (Heinrich 2008: 119).
8. This state of affairs arises from a passage in *Capital* that is usually not understood, in which Marx on the one hand emphasizes that it's only a specific social relationship between people 'which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things' (Marx 1976: 165) and on the other hand writes that 'to the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material [dinglich] relations between persons and social relations between things' (ibid.: 166). On this, see Wolf (1985: 217).
9. What 'vanishes' in the empirical forms of wealth is not the fact that labor is necessary to create its material bearers, but rather that the form itself is the

- exclusive result of a specific social relation, abstract labor as the substance of value.
10. This is also practiced in the most elaborated commentaries; see Fischer (1978: 80 ff.), Heinrich (2008: 174) and Lindner (2013: 289, 346). The overloading of the concept of fetishism corresponds to that of the concept of reification in Lukács' work.
 11. Extreme examples are Colletti (1977: 28 ff.), Jappe (2005: 161, 193), Grigat (2007: 53) and Iorio (2010: 254 ff.). For a critique of irrationalism in the reception of Marx, see Elbe (2008), Elbe (2010: 139 ff., 251) and Wolf (1985: 221 ff.).
 12. See also: 'the effects of a certain social form of labour are ascribed to objects, to the products of this labour; the relationship itself is imagined to exist in material form. We have already seen that this is a characteristic of labour based on commodity production, on exchange value, and this quid pro quo is revealed in the commodity, in money [...] and to a still higher degree in capital' (Marx and Engels 2010c: 428).
 13. See also: 'this fetishism of the world of commodities arises from the peculiar social character of the labour which produces them' (Marx 1976: 165).
 14. Dannemann (1987: 41ff.) and Wallat (2009: 87) go in this direction when they distinguish between two forms of reification: real inversion and ideological inversion.

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The Critique of Real Abstraction: From the Critical Theory of Society to the Critique of Political Economy and Back Again

Chris O’Kane

There has been a renewed engagement with real abstraction in recent years. Scholars associated with the New Reading of Marx (including Postone (1996); Arthur (2004, 2013); Murray (2016); Bellofiore (2016) and others) have employed the idea in their important reconstructions of Marx’s critique of political economy. Toscano and Bhandar (2015), Endnotes (2013) and Moore (2015) have utilized and extended these theorizations to conceive of race, gender and nature as real abstractions. Both the New Reading and these new theories of real abstraction have provided invaluable work. The former has contributed to systematizing Marx’s inconsistent and unfinished theory of value as a theory of the abstract social domination of capital accumulation and reproduction. The latter has supplemented such a theory. Yet their exclusive focus on real abstraction in relation to the critique of political economy means that the

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critical Marxian theories of real abstraction—developed by Alfred Sohn-Rethel, Theodor W. Adorno and Henri Lefebvre—have been mostly bypassed by these new theories and have largely served as the object of trenchant criticism for their insufficient grasp of Marx's theory of value by the New Reading. Consequently, these new readings and new theories of real abstraction elide important aspects of Sohn-Rethel, Adorno and Lefebvre's critiques of real abstraction, which sought to develop Marx's critique of political economy into objective-subjective critical theories of the reproduction of capitalist society.¹ However, two recent works by Bonefeld (2014) and Lotz (2014) have taken a different tactic; drawing together elements of the critical theories of real abstraction and the new reading of real abstraction, pointing toward a new reading of the critical theory of real abstraction.

In what follows, I map the development of the critique of real abstraction from its origins to the present.² In the first section, I discuss the ambiguous status of the critique of real abstraction in Marx. In the second section, I provide an overview of the development of the critique of real abstraction as a critical theory of capitalist society in Sohn-Rethel, Adorno and Lefebvre's work. In the third section, I look at their reception in the New Reading of Marx and the New Reading's systematization of the theory of real abstraction in the critique of political economy. In the fourth section, I compare the new theories of real abstraction with Lotz and Bonefeld, pointing to the shortcomings of the former and demonstrating how the latter utilize the critique of real abstraction to integrate the critical theory of real abstraction and the new reading of real abstraction. I close by pointing to several ways I have further developed this new reading of the critical theory of real abstraction and indicate how it can be further developed by drawing on the ideas of Sohn-Rethel, Adorno and Lefebvre and integrating the work of Toscano/Bhandar, Endnotes and Moore.

THE PREHISTORY OF REAL ABSTRACTION

Marx's Critique of Real Abstraction

Marx never used the term 'real abstraction', yet he was concerned with two types of abstraction of central concern to the notions of real abstraction examined here. These abstractions consist in the social constitution and constituent properties of the supra-individual socially-objective categories of political economy and the inability of utopian socialists and

political economists to grasp this historically-specific process of social domination due to their ill-conceived methodology of abstraction. Marx's most concise formulation of this relationship comes in an 1846 letter to Annenkov, where he remarks that:

Mr Proudhon, chiefly because he doesn't know history, fails to see that, in developing his productive faculties ... man develops certain inter-relations, and that the nature of these relations necessarily changes with the modification and the growth of the said productive faculties. He fails to see that economic categories are but abstractions of those real relations that they are truths only in so far as those relations continue to exist. Thus he falls into the error of bourgeois economists who regard those economic categories as eternal laws and not as historical laws which are laws only for a given historical development, a specific development of the productive forces. Thus, instead of regarding politico-economic categories as abstractions of actual social relations that are transitory and historical, Mr Proudhon, by a mystical inversion, sees in the real relations only the embodiment of those abstractions. (Marx and Engels 1982: 100)

From this perspective, *Capital* can be seen as an attempt to systematically work out these insights by means of a double-faceted critique of political economy. As Marx states in the preface to *Capital*, such a critique takes a distinct 'scientific' approach to the mystified social reality of the capitalist mode of production. Since 'all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided' (Marx 1993: 97) where this critical science 'comes in is to show *how* the law of value asserts itself' (Marx 1988: 70). On one level, Marx's critique thus unites essences and appearances by showing how capitalistically organized social labor necessarily appears in the real abstractions of value, which mediate the accumulation and reproduction of capital, thus exposing how the law of value asserts itself. On another level, it criticizes the discipline of political economy, in which 'the fetishism peculiar to bourgeois political economy [...] metamorphoses the social, economic character impressed on things in the process of social production into a natural character stemming from the material nature of those things' (Marx 1982: 227).

To cut a long story short, *Capital* demonstrates that it is the historically-specific capitalist social form—entailing production for profit by privately owned independent firms incumbent on the separation of producers from the means of production and of the sphere of production from circulation—that creates the dual character of concrete and abstract labor. Due

to the former, abstract labor (the substance of value) necessarily appears in the value-form of money and commodities. This value-relation necessarily appears in the process of capitalist accumulation and reproduction. The 'movement' of this process as represented in the formulas of political economy (MCM') is not a 'mere abstraction' but rather the representation of a dominating supra-individual socially-objective 'abstraction *in actu*' (idem: 111), compelling capitalists to exploit workers in order to generate profit and workers to sell their labor power in order to survive.

Marx's critique of the discipline political economy is linked to this aforementioned method of presentation. As the above has shown, Marx establishes that 'the categories of bourgeois economics' are 'forms of thought which are socially valid and therefore objective for the relations of production belonging to this historically determined mode of social production'(idem: 169). However, since political economy only reflects upon this process 'post-festum with the results of the process of development to hand', they fail to grasp this historically-specific process of social abstraction and domination, instead proceeding to treat the categories of bourgeois economics as 'natural and immutable forms of social life' (idem: 168).

Yet it is important to note that Marx's double-faceted critique of political economy was incomplete, and that there are important ambivalences in his account of the genesis and characteristics of real abstraction. Not only does he define abstract labor as a historically-specific social and trans-historical physiological entity,³ Marx likewise equivocates as to whether the process of abstraction takes place in production or exchange.⁴ In addition, he also notes that this process is only fully realized in the incarnation of world money on the world market, a point at which he never arrived in his method of presentation.⁵ Finally, Marx proceeds to critique political economy on the basis of an ideal model of the capitalist mode of production, abstracted from capitalist society. Thus rather than a systematic elaboration of the social constitution and reproduction of the capitalist mode of production, let alone capitalist society, in which people within the capital relation are dominated by abstractions they collectively produce behind their backs, Marx presents an intriguing if unsystematic critique of the genesis and reproduction of capital qua accumulation as a process of abstract social domination. The two approaches to real abstraction that I focus on in the second and third sections would try to fill in these gaps in two different ways via the development of the critique of the abstract domination of capital into a critical theory of the reproduction of capitalist

society and then on the basis of the New Reading of Marx's theory of value that provides a systematic reconstruction and expansion of the accumulation and reproduction of capital.

REAL ABSTRACTION IN CRITICAL THEORIES OF SOCIETY

Sohn-Rethel

Alfred Sohn-Rethel was the first to use the term 'real abstraction' in Marxian theory. Simmel (2004) first used the term in 1900. In part, a rejoinder to what he saw as the insufficiencies of the 'objective' status of Marx's theory of value, Simmel's work promulgated a neo-Kantian 'subjective' theory of value that investigated the effects of money in the context of what he saw as the inextricable separation of subject from object in modern society.⁶ For Simmel, the real abstraction of value exemplified this: 'Exchange, i.e. the economy, is the source of economic values because exchange is the representative of the distance between subject and object which transforms subjective feelings into objective valuation' (Simmel quoted in Reichelt 2007: 15).

In contrast to Marx, for Simmel, the real abstraction of value was thus established by individuals using the Kantian faculties of the mind embedded in market exchange; an inevitable consequence of the complex division of labor of modern society that separated subjects from the objects they create. Instead of a historically-specific-form of social domination constituent of the capitalist mode of production, real abstraction was thus the hallmark of the tragedy of modern culture.

As his use of the term implies, Sohn-Rethel's critique of real abstraction consisted in an immanent criticism of the neo-Kantian tragedy of culture on a Marxian basis. Such a critical theory was established by drawing on the critique of political economy. For Sohn-Rethel, critical Marxism was premised on the notion that 'Marxian thinking is undogmatic and critical to the core' (Sohn-Rethel 1978: 192). Accordingly, Sohn-Rethel held that Marx's methodology entailed 'an approach to reality, but by way of the 'critique' of the historically given consciousness' (idem: 194–195), which consisted in 'tracing the genetical origin of any current ideas and concepts, on the very standards of the social existence determining ideas and concepts' (idem: 195). In Marx's case, such a method was employed to critique the 'particular mode of consciousness of political economy' as the 'necessary false consciousness' of capitalist society, by unveiling 'the

historical origin of the seemingly timeless concept of 'value', and thus to aid the overcoming of such a society. However, given some inconsistencies in Marx's work, his inability to grasp its full importance, and the socio-historical transformations that had occurred in the 100 odd years between the publication of *Capital* and *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, Sohn-Rethel also held that 'an extension to Marxist theory' was 'needed for a fuller understanding of our own epoch' (idem: 1).

Faced with the bureaucratic class rule in the self-proclaimed socialist countries of the East and the tragedy of modern culture cultivated by his neo-Kantian peers, Sohn-Rethel thus expanded Marx's critique of political economy into a critical theory of society. He did so by demonstrating the internal socio-historical relationship between the supposedly trans-historical forms of scientific thought and the class antagonistic division of mental and manual labor, in order to criticize the integral roles these subjective and objective capacities played in perpetuating the false societies of capitalism and really existing socialism.

This critique was established by Sohn-Rethel's development of the 'formal', rather than the 'labour', aspect of Marx's analysis of the commodity. According to Sohn-Rethel, the latter 'holds the key not only to the critique of political economy, but also to the historical explanation of the abstract conceptual mode of thinking and of the division of intellectual and manual labour, which came into existence with it' (idem: 33). This is because the real abstraction of value is created by the social synthesis of a class antagonistic division of intellectual and manual labor. For, drawing on Marx's notion that 'they do it but they are not aware of it':

the abstraction comes about by force of the action of exchange ... out of the exchanging agents practising their solipsism against each other. The abstraction belongs to the interrelationship of the exchanging agents and not to the agents themselves. For it is not the individuals who cause the social synthesis but their actions in exchange, the action is social, the minds are private. (Idem: 44)

Contra Simmel, such a process of abstraction is not then created by the anthropological faculties of the mind when confronted by an inevitably complex modern society, but it proceeds from a class antagonistic socio-historical basis and is realized in the mind. Moreover, the very qualities of Simmel's neo-Kantian epistemology, and scientific understanding in general—what Sohn-Rethel terms 'conceptual abstraction'—are correspond

to and issue from the properties of the exchange abstraction generated by such a society. Thus, in contrast to bureaucratic socialism and the tragedy of culture, these subjective and objective entities are inextricably linked to the antagonistic social synthesis of class society and thus integral to reproducing these societies (idem: 203). Overcoming class antagonism would thus entail the overcoming of the division of intellectual and manual labor, enabling human flourishing in truly socialist forms of production that overcome this division.

Intellectual and Manual Labour thus sought to supplement Marx's critique of political economy by developing a critical social theory of real abstraction, which demonstrated that the Kantian scientific intellect, and the division between intellectual and manual labor are likewise forms of 'necessary false consciousness' that are inextricably linked with reproduction of class societies held together by exchange. Sohn-Rethelian real abstraction served as the fulcrum of this critique insofar as the socially synthetic act of exchange in class societies, characterized by the division of intellectual and manual labor, gives rise to the real abstraction of value, which is created by the hand, not the head, whose characteristics, in turn, are mirrored in the conceptual abstraction of scientific understanding. It was thus a critical social theory of real abstraction.

Adorno

As their correspondence shows, Adorno was an enthusiastic supporter of Sohn-Rethelian real abstraction, even if Adorno's parallel project differentiated itself in important, if often neglected, ways. This can be seen in Adorno's famous statement that 'Alfred Sohn-Rethel was the first to point out that ... in the general and necessary activity of the Spirit, inalienably social labor lies hidden' (Adorno 2001a: Redirection of the Subjective Reduction).⁷ For, as I shall now show, this passage points to the similarities and differences between Sohn-Rethel and Adorno's critical theory of real abstraction.

Like Sohn-Rethel, Adorno also characterized his critical theory of society as an attempt to adapt Marx's critique of political economy to the current epoch through his own interpretation of Marx's theory of 'exchange'. However, unlike Sohn-Rethel, as the quotation indicates, such a critique entailed an account of the social formation of epistemology via the fetishistic exchange abstraction that brought together Marx, Kant and Hegel. Moreover, this notion of abstraction was also tied to Adorno's theory of

social domination and the formation of maimed subjectivity. Thus, while Sohn-Rethel and Adorno formulated theories of real abstraction that elucidated the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity in order to critique the reproduction of capitalist society, Adorno's critical theory possesses these distinct points of emphasis.

Adorno's critical social theory of the fetishistic exchange abstraction thus sought to supplement what he saw as two important theoretical insufficiencies in Marx's critique of political economy. In the first place, Adorno held that Marx's lacked a 'completely developed notion of dialectics' (Adorno et al. 1981: 24) and 'out of disgust for petty academic squabbles rampaged through ... epistemological categories like the proverbial bull in the china-shop' (Adorno 2001a: Materialism Imageless). In the second, since Marx's prognostications of pauperization and revolution had not come about, but his law of crisis was nonetheless the 'model' of a dialectic concept of meaning, in which societal essence which shapes appearances, appears in them and conceals itself in them, 'modifications' in historical development 'should also be derived from it' (Adorno et al. 1981: 37). Therefore, since 'exchange was still key to society' Adorno endeavored to develop a dialectical critique of society that addressed these gaps.

These concerns were addressed by Adorno in his late work through the internally related ideas of society as subject, society as object, exchange and conceptuality. For Adorno, the negative totality of capitalist society is subject and object. Individuals within the class relation unwittingly constitute the fetishistic exchange abstraction, which possesses the autonomous supra-individual properties of a 'mediating conceptuality', inverting to dominate and maim the subjects who collectively create the former, compelling them to reproduce capitalist society.⁸ Consequently, since, 'the abstraction ... in question is really the specific form of the exchange process itself, the underlying social fact through which socialization first come about' (Adorno et al. 1981: 31) this means that 'The law which determines how the fatality of mankind unfolds itself is the law of exchange'; (Adorno et al. 1981: 80) a 'mediating conceptuality' that is 'independent both of the consciousness of the human beings subjected to it and of the consciousness of the scientists' (idem) and yet is internally related to identity thinking and subject formation.

Consequently, as the necessary consciousness of the false society, Adorno characterized the collectively and unconsciously constituted con-

ceptuality of exchange as the ‘phenomenology of the non-mind’, which is internally related to the epistemology of identity thinking via the process of ‘socialization’. Like Sohn-Rethel, the origins of scientific epistemology thus lie in the exchange abstraction. Yet, in contrast to Sohn-Rethel, this relationship is not simply characterized by deriving the analogous properties that the categories of the understanding possess from exchange, but via the mutually reinforcing properties of exchange and identity thinking. This is also supplemented by the meditation between the transcendental subject and with it the categories of understanding and the exchange abstraction, which pertains to the constitution of subjectivity and to the social objectivity of exchange, and thus in turn to subjects constituting and reproducing society.⁹

Therefore, not only did the formation of the transcendental subject establish an epistemological framework that cannot grasp its own genesis, but it also deformed subjectivity. As ‘a relationship between human beings’ that is ‘just as much founded in them as it comprehends and constitutes them, the ‘universal domination of exchange-value over human beings’, maims individuals; rendering them ‘powerlessly dependent on the whole’ (Adorno 2001a: Redirection of the Subjective Reduction 178–180), compelling them to reproduce society for the sake of self-preservation.

Taken in tandem with Adorno’s periodization of late capitalism¹⁰—wherein Marx’s theory of crisis had been counteracted by the affluence of the ‘Keynesian Golden age’—Adorno’s utilized his theory of the fetishistic exchange abstraction to account for an integrated mass society. For Adorno, the resultant social totality was ‘negative’.

Yet, Adorno also held that the exchange abstraction was a fetishistic objective illusion and that ‘totality was a critical category’ (Adorno 2001b; Adorno et al. 1981: 13) oriented toward the subject. His critical theory thus sought to cultivate the autonomy of subjects by pointing to the contradictory character and ultimate irrationality of the antagonistic social relations that constitute the exchange abstraction and reproduce the domination, maiming and misery inherent in such society, in order to negate it. Hence, Adorno’s notion of the fetishistic exchange abstraction mirrors Sohn-Rethel’s notion of real abstraction insofar as the former is the fulcrum of Adorno’s extrapolation of Marx’s theory of value into a critique of the objective-subjective reproduction of capitalist society.

Lefebvre

Henri Lefebvre is often portrayed as the 'leading prophet of alienation' (Merrifield 2006: XXXII). Yet his lifelong project of critiquing the reproduction of capitalist society, via his elaboration of the domination of lived experience in his critique of everyday life, cities and space, was likewise centered on a critical Marxist critique of fetishistic concrete abstraction that paralleled Sohn-Rethel and Adorno's work.¹¹

Like Sohn-Rethel and Adorno, for Lefebvre, Marx's theory was 'not a system or dogma', but a 'starting point that is indispensable for understanding the present-day world' (Lefebvre 1968: 77). Like these thinkers, Lefebvre held that Marx's 'basic concepts' had 'to be elaborated, refined, and complemented by other concepts where necessary' (idem: 188). Consequently, mirroring these figures, Lefebvre's critique of real abstraction, was thus developed as part of his elaboration of the relationship between his interpretation of fetishistic concrete abstraction in the critique of political economy and a critique of the domination of lived experience in the objective-subjective entities of everyday life, cities and space in capitalist society.

Lefebvre's interpretation of fetishistic concrete abstraction entailed 'social reality, i.e., interacting human individuals and groups', creating '*appearances* which are something more and else than mere illusions' for these 'appearances are the modes in which human activities manifest themselves within the whole they constitute at any given moment'. What Lefebvre called 'concrete abstractions' are thus real abstractions; these appearances are 'abstract' social forms which are nonetheless 'concrete' since they are constituted by social labor (Lefebvre 2009: 76). Like Sohn-Rethel and Adorno, Lefebvre also stressed that concrete abstractions are not created by the mind, but possess a 'practical power'. They 'have a concrete, objective reality: historically (as moments of the social reality) and actually (as elements of the social objectivity)' (idem: 76–77). For 'The starting-point for this abstraction is not in the mind, but in the practical activity ... Abstraction is a practical power' (idem: 109).

Moreover, mirroring Adorno, Lefebvre emphasized that the extent of form-determinate domination is limited. 'For the logic of commodities ... does not succeed in forming a permanent closed system'. The 'complex determinations' of 'human labour' are 'not entirely taken over by this form' (Lefebvre 1968: 100). Rather, the reification of persons is prevented by the internal opposition of the qualitative content of these forms.

Lefebvre's ensuing critique of fetishistic concrete abstraction thus 'implies and envelops the critique of political economy of Marx and tries to apprehend the social being whose existence is based on economic activity and beyond' by extending and complementing the critique of political economy in order to understand how capitalist society is reproduced and resisted in everyday life, cities and space.

These three approaches to the domination of lived experience are brought together in *The Production of Space* where 'social space encompasses ... the critical analysis of urban reality and ... everyday life'. From this perspective, Lefebvre's theory of social space is a critical social theory that attempted to critique the reproduction of capitalist society via his utilization and enhancement of the critique of political economy as a critique of real fetishistic concrete abstraction. For, 'If the critique of political economy ... were ... to be resumed, it would no doubt demonstrate how that political economy of space corresponded exactly to the self-presentation of space as the worldwide medium of the definitive installation of capitalism' (Lefebvre 1992: 104). Accordingly:

Social relations, which are concrete abstractions, have no real existence save in and through space. *Their underpinning is spatial* ... the connection between this underpinning and the relations it supports calls for analysis. Such an analysis must ... explain a genesis and constitute a critique of those institutions and so forth, that have transformed the space under consideration. (Idem: 404)

From this, it follows that the 'concrete abstraction' of the commodity-form possesses a 'social' 'practical power', which has a social underpinning, since it is produced by social labor. Marx's critique of the commodity-form must then be supplemented by a critique of the abstract space it inhabits. Abstract space is thus generated by social labor and possesses the characteristics of a concrete abstraction. The three abstract forms of 'neo-capitalism' (which also includes analogous types of bureaucracy) are thus embedded in 'spatial practice'; a wide-ranging category that 'subsumes the problems of the urban sphere' and 'everyday life', where the domination of abstract space transforms 'lived experience' and 'bodies' into 'lived abstractions', maiming them and compelling them to reproduce capitalist society. Yet, because 'capitalism and the bourgeoisie can achieve nothing but abstractions', spatial practice is also a contradictory space where abstract space and the concrete abstractions of

'neo-capitalism' meet their inherent qualitative opposition in qualitative, localized, differentiated oppositions.

Lefebvre's critique of the real abstraction of abstract space thus drew on his interpretation of fetishistic forms of concrete abstraction, complementing Marx's critique of political economy by showing where the concrete abstraction of the 'great fetish' forms of domination emerge and how they dominate and regulate life in the realm of spatial practice. At the same time, the real abstraction of abstract space is opposed by the qualitative contents of concrete space. Consequently, mirroring Sohn-Rethel and Adorno, Lefebvre's notion of concrete abstraction is integral to his critical theory of the reproduction of capitalist society via his elaboration of the domination of lived experience by the real abstractions of capitalist society in abstract space. Moreover, further echoing Sohn-Rethel and Adorno, in promulgating such a critique, Lefebvre holds that via such a critique man can become 'conscious of' and 'transcend the momentary form' of these 'relations', seizing on the inherently human content and annulling the concrete abstractions that oppose them with 'practical methods', and 'with practical energy' (Lefebvre 2008: 38). As a whole, these critical theories of real abstraction thus drew on and developed Marx's critique of political economy into critical theories of the reproduction of capitalist society.

REAL ABSTRACTION IN THE NEW READING OF MARX

The critical-theoretical lineage of what is known as the New Reading of Marx is marked by the influence of Sohn-Rethel, Adorno and, to a lesser degree, Lefebvre.¹² Yet as these designations imply, thinkers in this strand of scholarship—such as Hans-Georg Backhaus, Helmut Reichelt, Moishe Postone and Chris Arthur—are primarily concerned with developing a systematic reconstruction rather than supplementation of Marx's critique of political economy. Consequently, as I now show, these thinkers tend to have an ambiguous relationship with Adorno, Sohn-Rethel and even Lefebvre's critiques of real abstraction. On the one hand, they are undoubtedly influenced by their conception of the critique of political economy as a critique of the social constitution of social domination. Yet, on the other hand, even if they sometimes pose their work as resolving problems in the Marxian bases of Adorno, Sohn-Rethel's and Lefebvre's theories, they also lodge trenchant criticisms of these thinkers in their respective reconstructions of Marx's theory of value. Thus, while these

scholars' contributions and criticisms have proven invaluable, they have also had the unintended consequences of shifting and narrowing the purview of the critique of real abstraction from the critical theory of the reproduction of capitalist society to the critique of the accumulation and reproduction of the capitalist mode of production.

Postone

Moishe Postone's seminal work, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, undertakes a critical-theoretical reconstruction of Marx's critique of political economy that systematizes Marx's ambiguous theorization of abstract labor. For Postone, it is ultimately the historically-specific reciprocal determination of concrete and abstract labor in conjunction with abstract time that compulsively mediates the 'treadmill' dynamic of capitalist accumulation and reproduction. The cornerstone of this interpretation is Postone's argument that 'in Marx's analysis, the category of abstract labor expresses this real social process of abstraction; it is not simply based on a conceptual process of abstraction' (Postone 1996: 152). This means that for Postone, the critique of real abstraction is tantamount to the critique of political economy as a historically-specific critique of labor.

On this basis, Postone puts forward pertinent and trenchant criticisms of Sohn-Rethel's notion of real abstraction as 'not a labor abstraction but an exchange abstraction'. For, as Postone rightly notes 'Sohn-Rethel ... does not relate the notion of labor abstraction' but that of exchange 'to the creation of alienated social structures'.¹³ This means that Sohn-Rethel treats classless society as tantamount to abolishing exchange, not the capitalist division of labor.

Moreover, as Postone intriguingly argues Sohn-Rethel's notion of real abstraction undermines his corresponding critique of epistemology. In this first place, it 'weakens his sophisticated attempt at an epistemological reading of Marx's categories'. In the second, his 'emphasis on exchange, which excludes any examination of the implications of the commodity form for labor, restricts his social epistemology to a consideration of forms of static, abstract mechanical thought necessarily excludes many forms of modern thought from the purview of his critical social epistemology', thus preventing Sohn-Rethel from 'dealing with nineteenth- and twentieth-century forms of thought in which the form of capital-determined production itself takes on a fetishized form' (idem: 178).

Postone's work focused on developing his own epistemological reading of Marx's categories as subjective forms of thought generated by the real abstraction of labor. He developed an important critique of the epistemology of anti-Semitism as a foreshortened and regressive critique of capitalism. Unfortunately, he never provided a critique of social epistemology in correlation to this critique of labor nor extended his systematic reconstruction of the critique of political economy into a critique of the reproduction of capitalist society.¹⁴

Reichelt

Helmut Reichelt argues that "The "principle of exchange" and, connected to this, the "exchange abstraction" as "real abstraction" form a central component of Adorno's concept of society" (Reichelt 2007: 3). This is because "Adorno's critical theory ... understands the capitalist economy as an inverted reality in which individuals no longer "interact with one another" on the market as rationally acting subjects, as the idea of the exchange economy suggests" (idem: 5). Yet, as Reichelt perceptively points out, despite its programmatic status in Adorno's critical theory, Adorno only 'assumes' that the whole economy is to be developed out of the exchange principle, meaning that "How this process of autonomisation is to be conceptualised in detail is not explained by Adorno" leaving "the central concepts—objective abstraction, inversion, autonomisation, totality, power of the universal over the particular" as "postulates with regard to their concretisation as far as the critique of economics is concerned" (idem: 6).

From this vantage point, Reichelt has developed a notion of real abstraction with regard to his elaboration of Marx's monetary theory of value. Such a theory holds that the atomized capitalist process of production for exchange constitutes a sensible supersensible inverted world, in which sensuousness in its widest sense—as use value, labor, exchange with nature—is demoted to a means of the self-perpetuation of an abstract process that underlies the whole objective world of constant change... the whole sensuous world of human beings who reproduce themselves through the satisfaction of needs and labor is step-by-step sucked into this process, in which all activities 'are themselves inverted' (Reichelt 2005: 46–47).

This is because the sensible productive activity of individuals within the class relation of the capitalist social division of labor are necessarily realized

and mediated by the supersensible real abstractions of the value-forms of political economy, resulting in the accumulation and reproduction of capital.

While Reichelt's early work attempted to reconstruct this theory of value, his later work held that Marx's monetary theory of value was incomplete, and Reichelt attempted to complete and systematize the former on the basis of his notion of validity. While such a notion of validity has its detractors,¹⁵ it is also important to note that in spite of his starting point, Reichelt's systematization of Marx's theory of value refrains from addressing how such an interpretation solves the aforementioned gap in Adorno's interpretation of Marx, let alone how it pertains to Adorno's critical theory of society, nor has Reichelt used this formulation of Marx's theory of value to articulate the reproduction of capitalist society.

Kerr

Finally, Derek Kerr points out that Lefebvre's theory of abstract space refrains from properly integrating Marx's theory of accumulation. By 'separating out contradictions of space from those in space and by reducing class struggle and history to the latter, it is not clear what constitutes the contradictions of space'. In 'abandoning the Marx of *Capital*', Lefebvre's theory of 'the relation between the mode of production and its space is never specified' (Kerr 1994: 25). Drawing on the early work of Bonefeld, Kerr argues that Marx's critique uncovers 'the contradictory constitution of the capital relation as it attempts to transform and express itself through the spatial and temporal modalities of existence' (idem: 32). While making the incisive point that it is the time of surplus production that is realized in the relation between time and abstract space, Kerr has not explored the relationship between these forms of real abstraction, abstract space and the domination of lived experience as proposed by Lefebvre.

In sum, the New Reading of Marx is undoubtedly correct at pointing to the systematic shortcomings in the value-theoretical bases of Sohn-Rethel, Adorno and Lefebvre's critical social theories of real abstraction. Postone and Reichelt's systematizations of the ambiguous aspects of Marx's theory of value that elaborate the constitution and reproduction of capital via the social objectivity of abstract labor and the forms of value are likewise important conceptions of real abstraction. Yet the unintended consequences of the new reading has been to diminish the status of the critical theory of real abstraction, reducing it to an errant ersatz reading of the critique of political economy.

In the next section, I argue that this approach has served as the basis for a number of new theories of real abstraction. I then contrast this approach with work that has brought together the new reading of Marx and the critical theory of society. I close by arguing that the second approach should be further developed to articulate what I call the New Reading of the Critical Theory of Real Abstraction.

NEW THEORIES OF REAL ABSTRACTION

Toscano's widely influential works on the notion of real abstraction, are both representative of and influential on these new theories of real abstraction. In his most influential article on real abstraction Toscano (2008), depicts Sohn-Rethel as part of the 'debate on real abstraction'. According to Toscano, this debate centers on the interpretation of the introduction to *the Grundrisse* and includes a number of scholars from divergent theoretical perspectives¹⁶ who are said to have elaborated theories of real abstraction 'in terms of both the methodology of Marxism and the logic and ontology of capitalism' (Toscano 2008: 273). Toscano does point out that Sohn-Rethel differentiates his critique of epistemology from the critique of political economy and bases his notion of real abstraction on commodity fetishism rather than the 1857 introduction. Yet a number of scholars have followed or collaborated with Toscano in formulating new theories of the real abstractions of race, property, gender and nature on the basis of elaborating the systematic roles these social phenomena play in the logic and ontology of capitalist accumulation on the basis of a Marxian, rather than Sohn-Rethelian or critical-theoretical, methodology that draws on the new reading.

Drawing on Postone and Arthur's value-form theory, Endnotes systematically dialectically derives gender as a real abstraction by virtue of the role that gendered reproductive labor plays in capital accumulation and reproduction. Toscano and Bhandar (2015) bring the value-theoretic interpretation of real abstraction together with Hall, Althusser, Dunbar Ortiz, Locke and others to conceive of property and race as 'real abstractions' due to their integral roles in capital accumulation. Finally, drawing on Toscano, Moore (2015, 2016) argues that the historical creation of Nature as a real abstraction is the underlying condition of capital accumulation insofar as relegating the ecosystem and non-white males to the realm of nature is the premise that appears in these results.

These new theories certainly are important and focus on types of domination integral to capitalist society, which were not included in the critical

theories of real abstraction. Yet, in conceiving of these phenomena as ‘real abstractions’ on the basis of the roles that they play in the logic of accumulation and reproduction of capital, they refrain from elaborating how these social phenomena are objective/subjective entities that are implicated in the wider process of the reproduction of capitalist society. Moreover, in eschewing the subjective components of these phenomena, they occlude the experience of domination, the shaping of subjectivity, and how these processes contribute to the dynamic of the reproduction of capitalist totality. A critical theory of the reproduction of capitalist society is thus passed over in favor of a systematic deepening of the critique of political economy that consequently provides a foreshortened critique of these social phenomena. In contrast, the recent work of Bonefeld and Lotz has brought together the new reading of Marx with the critical theory of society in a manner that eschews these shortcomings.

NEW CRITICAL THEORIES OF REAL ABSTRACTION

Much like these new theories of real abstraction, Bonefeld (2014) calls for the development of the critical interpretation of Marx rather than a reconstruction. In elaborating the former, however, Bonefeld brings the New Reading together with Adorno’s late critical theory of society. This entails envisioning society as a negative totality characterized by unity as disunity constituted and reproduced by the relations between subject and object. On this basis, Bonefeld criticizes, synthesizes and further develops the New Reading. He points out that Postone’s historically-specific critique of labor and Reichelt’s monetary theory of value ultimately complement each other, filling in their respective blind spots. Moreover, Bonefeld grounds Postone’s historically-specific critique of labor on primitive accumulation, while also developing an Adornian notion of class as a negative identity that compels individual action. Finally, Bonefeld also supplements this systematic development of economic categories with a theory of the state and world market that conceptualizes the former as ‘the concentrated force of social order’. The state, thus, not only ‘depoliticizes the socio-economic relations and so guarantees contractual relations of social interaction’ (Bonefeld 2014: 185–186) but also cultivates entrepreneurial instincts via vital politics. These social, economic and political premises characteristic of unity as disunity appear in ‘the form of a movement of real economic abstractions that, endowed with an invisible force, govern over and prevail through the social individuals’ (idem: 64) compelling the

reproduction of the separated unity of capitalist society. As the ‘anamnesis of the genesis’, the critique of political economy as a critical theory of society reduces this overarching social dynamic to the historically-specific social relations that constitute and reproduce such a society.

While Bonefeld refrains from examining epistemology and subjectivity, Lotz’s notion of the capitalist schema amounts to a return to Marx via Sohn-Rethel and Adorno that also proceeds to re-read Adorno and Sohn-Rethel in conjunction with the new reading of Marx. Lotz argues that money, rather than Kantian epistemology, is a real abstraction that via its totalizing process of socialization schematizes and thus creates subjectivity. For Lotz, ‘the capitalist schema “frames the whole of social relations under capitalism, as well as determines the *form* of everything that becomes subordinated to capital and its temporal horizons”’ (Lotz 2014: 114). Lotz proceeds to sketch a re-reading of the culture industry on this basis. Accordingly, Adorno’s notion of ‘total socialization [*totale Vergesellschaftung*] of a “subjectless subject” is only possible through the fluidity of capital as existing in the general intellect and its communicability i.e., in every aspect of life’ (idem: 129), which as ‘industries that take on the whole mental apparatus of capitalist individuals’ (idem: xv) produce thought, experience and reflection via the relationship between schematization, real abstraction accumulation and social reproduction. Like Bonefeld, Lotz’s theory of real abstraction unites the new reading with the critical theory of real abstraction to show how the objective-subjective elements of social totality are mediated and reproduced via the real abstraction of money.

CONCLUSION

Bonefeld and Lotz’s work point toward how I contend that the critical theory of real abstraction might be further developed, not merely as a reconstruction or systematic elaboration of Marx’s theory of value, but through the integration of critical theories and new readings of real abstraction.

My own recent work (O’Kane 2018c) has sought to further develop such a new reading of the critical theory of real abstraction, arguing how Adorno’s idea of society as subject and object, qua exchange, can be reformulated to critique ‘neoliberalism’, the 2007 crisis and the ensuing embrace of authoritarianism. My forthcoming work seeks to extend it to a conception of the negative totality of capitalist society that includes household production and the domination of nature.

Such a New Reading of the Critical Theory of Real Abstraction might be further developed via productively drawing together the critical theories of real abstraction and the new readings of real abstraction in a number of ways. For instance, Sohn-Rethel's critique of the division between intellectual and manual labor might be joined with Postone's insights to critique the recent ground swell of support for bureaucratic notions of social democracy as well as the implicit continuation of this separation in promethean notions of accelerationsism and fully automated luxury communism. In addition, Greig Charnock (Charnock et al. 2014; Charnock 2014, 2018) and Japhy Wilson's work (Wilson 2014) also provides the bases for critical Marxian readings of abstract space qua time that might incorporate the elements of Lefebvre's notions of the abstract domination of lived experience. Finally, the notions of race, gender and Nature as real abstractions developed by Toscano/Bhandar, Endnotes and Moore might be integrated into such an approach leading to the articulation of the subjective formation and domination of these types of subjectivity in the reproduction of capitalist society. Following this line of development would not only widen the scope of contemporary theories of real abstraction but return the theory to its integral role in critical theories of the reproduction of capitalist society.

NOTES

1. As I argue below Marx's notion of accumulation entails the reproduction of social relations in the sphere of production and circulation in the capitalist mode of production. Capitalist society refers to the objective and subjective domains of the capitalist economy as well as the state and private sphere, which are implicated in, yet distinct from, the process of capital accumulation.
2. See Elena Louisa Lange ([forthcoming](#)), for a discussion of the development of real abstraction from a value-theoretical perspective.
3. Marx's trans-historical definition of abstract labor holds that 'all labour is an expenditure of human labour, in the physiological sense, and it is this quality of being equal, or abstract, human labour, that it forms the value of commodities' (Marx n.d.: 137). This is contrasted with his historically-specific definitions which states that 'not an atom of matter' enters into this process of abstraction in which 'value is realized only in exchange, i.e. in a social process' (idem: 105). For a recent debate on these two definitions of abstract labor, see Bonefeld (2010) and Kicillof and Starosta (2011).

4. For an example of the former, see Marx's statement that 'The different proportions, in which different sorts of labour are reduced to simple labour as their standard, are established by a social process that goes on behind the back of the producers and, consequently, seems to be fixed by custom. In the values coat and linen, abstraction is made from the difference of their use-values; now we have seen that also in the labour that represents itself in these values, abstraction is made from the difference of its useful forms of tailoring and weaving' (Marx n.d.: 134–135). For the latter, see the French edition of *Capital* where Marx added the following sentence: 'it is evident that one abstracts from the use-value of the commodities when one exchanges them and that every exchange relation is itself characterized by this abstraction' (Marx quoted in Ehrbar 2010: 439). As I show below, these interpretations are represented by Sohn-Rethel and Postone.
5. Although this is mentioned in Chapter 3.3 of Volume I.
6. See David Frisby's introduction to Simmel (2004), Winder (n.d.).
7. The Redmond translation does not include page numbers, so I will include the name of the section when quoting from *Negative Dialectics*.
8. Adorno's most cohesive exposition of this process of abstraction can be found in Adorno (2018). For shorter variations, see also 'Sociology and Empirical Research' in Adorno et al. (1981), as well as Adorno (2002: 31–32). For a detailed reconstruction of Adorno's account of this process, see O'Kane (2018b).
9. Hence 'transcendental universality is no mere narcissistic self-exaltation of the I ...but has its reality in the domination which ends up prevailing and perpetuating itself through the exchange-principle' (Adorno 2001a: On the interpretation of the transcendental 180–182).
10. For a discussion of Adorno's periodization of late capitalism, see O'Kane (2018c).
11. This section draws on O'Kane (2018a).
12. The critical-theoretical lineage refers to thinkers who develop their new reading of Marx within the tradition of critical theory and includes not only students of Adorno but thinkers in other critical Marxist traditions, such as *Open Marxism*. This distinguishes them from others who work within this theoretical discourse, such as Michael Heinrich and Chris Arthur, who are influenced by the work of Backhaus, Reichelt and others but do not see their attempts to reconstruct the critique of political economy as part of the critical-theoretical tradition.
13. For an elaboration of this critique of Sohn-Rethel's notion of real abstraction, see Jappe (2013).
14. This is because while here and elsewhere Postone points to the relations between the treadmill dynamic, the state, crises and mass psychology, it is unfortunately the case that he has yet to systematically elaborate them.

15. See Lange ([forthcoming](#)) for an overview of the criticism of Reichelt's notion of validity.
16. Although he refrains from mentioning Adorno or Lefebvre, Toscano does include Althusser, someone Sohn-Rethel influenced (Virno) and a number of current scholars (Finelli, Zizek and Postone) as participants.

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Real Abstraction in Light of the ‘Practical Revolution in Epistemology’ (Labriola): Considerations on the Uses and Limits of a Concept

Wolfgang Fritz Haug

Words can become a ‘label by which the true believers recognize one another’; thus Marx angrily judged one of the phrases in the founding program of the Socialist Workers Party of Germany of 1875 (Marx and Engels 24 [2010a](#): 91; MEW 19 [1987](#): 25).¹ His own concepts were sometimes also not immune to similar misuse, such as his notion of ‘value abstraction’, indispensable for the analysis of the value-form, the gateway to understanding *Capital*. Such was also the case for the concept of ‘real abstraction’, with the help of which Alfred Sohn-Rethel claims to expose the conditions of possible potential and range of this Marxian conception. For the criterion for concepts is their contribution to understanding concrete reality. This is also the case for Sohn-Rethel’s abstract-general, meta-theoretical concept of real abstraction. Initially, it confronts us as a

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paradoxical *word*. Paradoxical because it is built from two words usually understood to be opposites. That's called an oxymoron in rhetoric. We can only understand by means of abstractions. That which is to be comprehended, we subsume under the name reality. Does that mean that what is to be grasped is always already understood? And that, because it goes without saying? In order to not cause confusion, I will first put a few of the abstractions that I will work with in the following into order.

I

Our first word was 'words'. What do we mean, when in contrast to that we say *concept* in a theoretical context? Now, every theoretical concept also initially confronts us as a word. But then it is the name for a piece of theory. We can speak of a theorem. When we go through it to say what a concept means, we in turn use other concepts, whose network is always traceable, referring to a theory in the sense of a theoretically permeated real problem field.

Are concepts accordingly the categories of a theory? They are often regarded as such, and in Soviet Marxism–Leninism they were 'officially' declared to be so. But then Marx spits in this conceptual soup with the fundamental statement of his critique: 'Classical political economy borrowed the category "price of labour" from everyday life without further criticism, and then simply asked the question, how is this price determined?' (Marx 1976: 677f.). If we additionally consider how he himself worked this field, we recognize the transition to a positive-theoretical conception: labor as such cannot be sold at all; only products of labor can (which includes services). Under the wage relation, what is sold is labor-power, measured in terms of the duration of time of its expenditure. The value of labor-power, in turn, is measured in terms of the labor necessary for its reproduction. Here is where the axiomatic statements apply: labor does not have value; it creates value. Where there were once categories, there are now concepts, which constitute a theorem. The category—in our example, the wage as the 'price of labor'—can however now be grasped in its own positivity. It is not simply false, but rather, as the everyday *form of praxis* of wage workers, saturated with empirical evidence. Marx generally determines that categories of this sort 'express the forms of being, the characteristics of existence, and often only individual sides of this specific society, this subject' (Marx 1973: 106). Marx knew Ancient Greek very well and know that the category of *kategoreuo*, 'to publicly accuse someone

of something', comes literally from *Agora*, the marketplace. The fundamental categories of our social existence are always already explicit. What Marx said about price applies to them: 'Everyone knows, if nothing else, that commodities have a common value-form which contrasts in the most striking manner with the motley natural forms of their use-values. I refer to the money-form' (Marx 1976: 159). And thus 'everyone' also knows that the wage is the price of labor, and everyone knows just as well that capital yields profit and land yields ground rent.

It is knowledge in the mode of self-evidence. It comes to us in that we move within our social relations, in which we have constituted ourselves as subjects. In German, that can be expressed as the effect of behavior in relations (*Verhalten in Verhältnissen*). In the interaction between behavior and relations, the network of categorical determinations of our social being opens up. They are 'in' us, because we always already live *in these determinate relations*. We spontaneously feel at home in them.

In *Capital*, Marx begins with this kind of knowledge, but then he takes us on the path from *common sense* to historical materialist science. It is the path of analysis and the genetic reconstruction of our relations. Category by category, things are conceptually reconstructed. The self-evident transforms step-by-step into a 'bewitched, distorted and upside-down world haunted by Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre, who are at the same time social characters and mere things' (Marx 1981: 969). Now we can honor 'the great merit of classical economics', of having dissolved 'this false appearance and deception, this autonomization and ossification of the different social elements of wealth vis-a-vis one another, this personification of things and reification of the relations of production, this religion of everyday life, by reducing interest to a part of profit and rent to the surplus above the average profit, so that they both coincide in surplus-value; by presenting the circulation process as simply a metamorphosis of forms, and finally in the immediate process of production reducing the value and surplus-value of commodities to labour' (idem).

But why did we need Marx for this, when it was already accomplished by Smith and Ricardo? We have to return again to the beginning.

II

In his critique of Hegel from 1843, the young Marx criticized—at this time, still close to Feuerbach—the operation with 'abstractly logical categories' as well as their subjectification, which causes the real determinations

to appear as merely ‘formal’ (Marx and Engels 3 2010c: 16ff.). Fourteen years later, Marx deals with this problematic in the famous chapter on method introducing the *Grundrisse*, but now already with the intellectual means of historical materialism. Here, he can be observed circling the problem. It is not a dogmatic text, not a doctrine of finished thought, but rather a text of theoretical production. Marx poses the problem as a question of the theoretical construction of his project of a critique of political economy. What role can universal-historical categories play in the theory of a historically specific mode of production; modern capitalism in this case? Marx experiments with the concept of ‘*production in general*’. Is it not one of the ‘traits’ or ‘characteristics’ that is ‘common’ to all ‘epochs of production?’ That’s why its concept appears to be an ‘abstraction’, measured against concrete-capitalist production, ‘but a rational abstraction in so far as it really brings out and fixes the common element and thus saves us repetition’ (Marx 1973: 85). But that fails at first due to the contradiction between historical change and a generalizing fixation that abstracts from time. There is no ‘production in general’ and also ‘no general production’. Spoken in terms of epistemological generality: determinations are not independent; they are ultimately always determinations of something real-concrete. But Marx rejects the question concerning the ‘relationship between scientific presentation and the real movement’ by stating that it does not ‘belong here yet’ (idem: 86). Initially, he analyzes the circular interrelation between production, distribution, exchange, and consumption, which all ‘form the members of a totality’ (idem: 99), and arrives at the important concept of the ‘predominant’ in the relation between these four always-present aspects of the economic—he thus determines the general status of abstract *production* (idem: 94). But he appears to be unsatisfied with this; rather, he starts again, now no longer directly as a factual issue, but rather as a question concerning the ‘method of political economy’.

He now turns to the question of the conceptual reconstruction of capitalist economy and first demonstrates—like Hegel at the beginning of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*—the failure of *common sense*, to which it spontaneously appears correct ‘to begin with the real and the concrete, with the real precondition, thus to begin, in economics, with e.g. the population, which is the foundation and the subject of the entire social act of production’ (idem: 100). However, this, the most immediately concrete, proves to be ‘an abstraction if I leave out, for example, the classes of which it is composed’. The classes, for their part, ‘are an empty phrase if I am not

familiar with the elements on which they rest. E.g. wage labour, capital, etc.', which in turn are empty abstractions without the division of labor, exchange, value, money, price, etc., not to forget labor, 'ever thinner abstractions until I had arrived at the simplest determinations' (idem). From here, 'the journey would have to be retraced until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations'. This is 'is obviously the scientifically correct method' (idem: 101). In these passages, Hegel's formula of ascending from the abstract to the concrete begins its career as the Marxist understanding of method. One was not disturbed by the fact that Marx thus described the act of theoretical construction begun by Smith and classically carried out by Ricardo; that of 'retracing the journey': 'As soon as these individual moments had been more or less firmly established and abstracted, there began the economic systems, which ascended from the simple relations, such as labour, division of labour, need, exchange value, to the level of the state, exchange between nations and the world market'. (idem: 100) May we conclude from this that he did not yet have his own path in view? After all, the *Grundrisse* (Outlines) *Of the Critique of Political Economy*, where he still had to struggle to present his object, were still ahead of him. Still hidden in the future for him, however, were the first volume of *Capital*—the only one completed by him in the two editions he had shaped and the French translation with its progressive layers of revision—in which he practiced his dialectical method as well as further developing (Haug 2006b) it and conceptualizing it. The manuscripts for the third volume quoted above also still largely don't 'know' anything of it.

But theoretically educated Marxists could know—at least since the beginning of the project of the first MEGA in the early Soviet Union and at the latest since the publication of the MEW. For *Capital* does not and could not begin—Althusser, who asked his readers to 'abstract' from the beginning of *Capital*, may forgive me—with abstract *labor*, but rather with the 'simplest concrete element of economics' in the form of 'the simplest social form in which the product of labour presents itself in contemporary society', the commodity form (Marx and Engels 24: 2010a: 544–545). This structure alone, obvious at first glance in the table of contents, should actually suffice for this commonplace to lose credibility.

III

A key question is in fact the one initially only dealt with in a rudimentary manner by Marx, that of how the ‘relationship between scientific presentation and the real movement’ (see above) is to be processed in a historical materialist manner. It is made concrete in the question concerning the beginning, then of how transitions from one level of reality to a more complex one are to be achieved. A priori constructions, also those in the name of Hegelian dialectic, are inadmissible. ‘Inquiry’, Marx writes in the Postface to the Second Edition, ‘has to appropriate the material in detail, to analyse its different forms of development and to track down their inner connection. Only after this work has been done can the real movement be appropriately presented’ (Marx 1976: 102). But that only describes, it does not explain, how Marx is to accomplish and epistemologically conceptualize this presentation. The task that Marx poses in the quoted *Postface* from 1873, and the solution to which he calls ‘my dialectical method’, sounds more concrete: grasping ‘every historically developed form as being in a fluid state’ and presenting it out of this rhythm of becoming and passing away (idem: 103). He returns to the ‘how’ of solving this task halfway, at the beginning of the chapter on machinery and large-scale industry, in a footnote where, 16 years after the introduction to the *Grundrisse*, he casually—as if in a protocol of reflection upon his theoretical mode of production—returns to the question of the scientifically correct method, but now looking back on what has already been achieved and looking forward with a clearer view to what has yet to be achieved. In context, it is a critical history of technology. Surprisingly, Marx refers back to his fourth thesis on Feuerbach from 1845, where he confronts Feuerbach’s analytical reduction of the ‘religious world’ to its ‘secular basis’ with the insight that the genesis of the religious world ‘can only be explained by the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness of this secular basis’ (Marx and Engels 5 2010d: 4). Now, in *Capital*, with regard to technology, he returns to this: ‘It is, in reality, much easier to discover by analysis the earthly kernel of the misty creations of religion than to do the opposite, i.e. to develop from the actual, given relations of life the forms in which these have been apotheosized. The latter method is the only materialist, and therefore the only scientific one’ (Marx 1976: 493, ff. 4). Within the context of the history of technology, Marx attributes the key role to the ‘active relation of man to nature’. In the social, especially

economic context, this practical behavior is at the same time embedded in specific social relations and the form-determinacies characteristic of them.

With an attentiveness sharpened by these hints, this same epistemological thought can already be discovered in the fourth part of the first chapter of *Capital* as the key to Marx's actual procedure, and thus to the operation significance of his conception of dialectic. That which characterizes Feuerbach's achievement and deficits in the critique of religion appears here analogously as the achievement and deficits of classical political economy: It had 'analysed value and its magnitude, however incompletely, and has uncovered the content concealed within these forms. But it has never once asked the question why 'this content has assumed that particular form, that is to say, why labour is expressed in value, and why the measurement of labour by its duration is expressed in the magnitude of the value of the product' (Idem: 174).

IV

Marx approaches bourgeois economics and its science with this question. He begins with the 'immense collection of commodities' as which the wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production predominates first confronts the superficial view of the passerby in the shop window, reduces it to the abstraction of the 'individual commodity' in general, and begins with the emergence of its dual character. The analysis leads him to the finding that the dominant determination of 'value', which initially emerges as the exchange relation between two commodities, does 'not contain an atom' of the use value that interests the potential buyer (idem: 128). This equation of two unequal commodities abstracts from it. Analysis follows this abstraction, and in the search for the equal element in the unequal hits upon the abstraction of the product of labor as such. It follows it into the sphere of production and initially follows the dual character of the commodity in commodity-producing labor. He then demonstrates the condition of its possibility, indeed necessity in the relations of private (non-social) production that is at the same time characterized by a division of labor (social). With that, he has found the entity (*Instanz*) that stamps the forms and above all form-relations (the reign of the real-abstract category of value over that of use value) encountered thus far on the commodities and their production. In it, and in its form-imprint he recognizes the 'point [...] crucial to an understanding of political economy' (idem: 132).

Up to this point, his path corresponds—at least *formally*—to that of ‘the path historically followed by economics at the time of its origins’ (Marx 1973: 100). Now he must also, if the ‘scientifically correct method’ of the *Introduction* from 1857 is still valid for *Capital*, follow the theoretical construction of the bourgeois classics. He in fact does so, however, only in its external sequence. Now, one can immediately discover that the parallels to the historical development of political economy were also only external. For what centrally occupies Marx from the first page—and which is announced in the preface to the first edition—neither is a topic in history nor in the bourgeois classics: namely that value as *form-determination* of human practice in relations of *private* production under conditions of *social* division of labor discloses its determination and its opposedness to the correspondent of human needs, use value.

Marx traces how practice in this form, on the basis of its contradictions together with the relations from which it originates, changes. The first trial by fire is the analysis of the forms of value, with the genetic reconstruction of the money form. The second trial by fire is the transitional from money to capital. In my *Introductory Lectures on Capital* I have shown in detail that Marx actually—according to his criteria, first envisaged in the *Theses on Feuerbach* and then in stages—follows the process direction of dynamics fed by the market participants’ behavior in their contradictory relations. I will return to the question of what this surprising pertinence of the *Theses on Feuerbach* for a close reading on *The Capital* signifies for our investigation (Haug 2017a).

First, in *staccato*, to avoid the usual misunderstandings: the object of the famous analysis of the forms of value is the ‘mode of expression’ (Marx 1976: 128) or ‘value expression’ of commodities.² Occasionally, the opinion is put forward that the second chapter on the process of exchange is dispensable because it doesn’t add anything new to the analysis of the forms of value. Whoever makes such a judgment has mixed up the ‘mode of expression’ of the value of commodities with their exchange. The former is dealt with in chapter 1.4, the latter in chapter 2. All further understanding depends upon this distinction. Just as the form of value is to be understood as a ‘form of praxis’ of those living within these relations, the expression of value is to be understood as a praxem, that is to say as a moment of praxis in this form: the value expression precedes exchange. Whereas exchange between two actors occurs ‘through an act to which both parties consent’ (idem: 178), the expression of value occurs initially as an offer by one of both parties to potential partners in exchange, who

do not yet appear, however. To *abstract* from this and the realized exchange is decisive in order to trace the ‘genesis’ of the ‘money form’. I will not repeat the details here. They are, so to speak, depicted in slow motion and by means of the force of abstraction that replaces the microscope that Marx announces in the foreword, in my *Vorlesungen*, supplemented by a few bridges to practical, everyday consciousness. Here only so much: the genetic reconstruction of the transitions from the simple to the expanded form of value and from this to the general form of value and finally to the money form, only presuppose (in the laboratory-like exclusion of (abstraction from) foreign—that is external to the exchange relationship being initiated—influences (which is why the reconstruction is genetic and not historical) one thing: that namely the driving force of interest in exchange as well as its objects continues to operate. Under this condition, the value form transitions into a more complex one ‘on its own’.

V

Marx had already discovered in his *Introduction* of 1857 that genesis and history diverge, and how this plays into the use of methodical abstraction in relation to objective moments or aspects. Namely where, as with the category of production, he raises the question as to universal concepts valid for all historical forms of production. The category ‘labor’, ‘labor as such’, ‘labor sans phrase’ offers itself, that is the abstraction of the category ‘labor’; not to be confused with the concept of ‘abstract labor’! (Marx 1973: 105). And it becomes clear to him how epistemological capacity and historical fact drift apart in such cases. As with other such abstractions, labor also ‘by no means begins only at the point where one can speak of it as such’, but rather ‘possess a truth for all other forms of society’ (idem). Only, in capitalism, effective-practical truth comes along: in the USA, ‘the most modern form of existence of bourgeois society’ of his time, Marx saw ‘the abstraction of the category “labour”, “labour as such”, labour pure and simple, becomes true in practice’ (idem). The truth of the abstraction here stands for the fact that—as Adorno says in the appropriate context—it clings (*schmigt sich an*) to a practical reality. In both cases, it is a question of opening up reality by means of a genetic reconstruction.

With that, we have again arrived at the question of real abstraction. It has consistently accompanied us as a dynamic moment of praxis in conditions of private production with a division of labor. For Marx, the value abstraction is a transitional point to its complementary opposite, a

more complex concreteness—initially in the shape of the ‘dazzling money-form’ (Marx 1976: 139), ‘the riddle of the commodity fetish, now become visible and dazzling to our eyes’ (idem: 187). His dialectical method withstands its trial-by-fire in the genetic reconstruction of that which we can name real concretion. The usefulness of the concept of real abstraction is measured by the real concreteness that opens it up, right up to the ‘great civilizing influence of capital’ (Marx, 1973: 409), the flip-side of the undermining of ‘the original sources of all wealth—the soil and the worker’ (Marx 1976: 638).

VI

Belonging to the reality that can be conceived of as real abstraction is the great para-ideological power of capitalist mass culture, to wit *commodity aesthetics*. Here, real abstraction means tangible autonomization in relation to the production of use value. This goes hand in hand with the real concretion of a particular economic sector, accompanied by the emergence of special art schools, where one learns to design imaginary use values independently of the real use value in the mode of aesthetic abstraction. These institutions act according to the ‘basic law of commodity aesthetics [...]’: It is not real use value that triggers the purchase, but rather the promise of use value’ (Haug 1980: 41, 44; 1986). Additionally, there is the pseudo-concretion according to the ‘operational law of commodity aesthetics’. The potential buyers have to promise the use value of the commodity to themselves, and this, their self-activity, must be able to rely on the appearance of the product produced in the abstract for itself. Therefore, the Archimedean point from which the mistrust of these addressees can be aesthetically unhinged, and the desire that motivates them to buy as an ‘inner means of coercion’ (Sombart) can be triggered, lies ‘within’ the potential buyers (52). The aesthetic abstraction of use value clings to this interior. This is our next real abstraction in the shape of a simulated concretion.

What is to be grasped here is the dialectic of opposites: the striving for abstract wealth becomes the spring from which modern semblance flows. Indifference cries out difference. It is precisely the indifference of capital toward its transitory use value that is expressed in its most fantastic staging. The abstraction from use value manifests as the aesthetic promise of use value and leads to the formation of aesthetic monopolies of use value. In short: real abstraction appears here as illusory concreteness for the pur-

chasing masses. It is precisely the abstraction from these masses that the real-ideological abstraction by distraction of their direct or mediated producer existence what expects these masses to convert them in *consumers*.

In a certain way, all the aesthetics that have been specifically differentiated are indebted to an aesthetic abstraction. The bourgeois institutionalization of 'aesthetics' as a discipline and socially recognized form of practice has lent aesthetic abstraction the significance of a projection screen of the imaginary. 'Autonomous art', thus constituted, could act as a sphere that reconciles a society torn apart and reified in the economic sphere in a 'beautiful illusion' (Haug 1994: 675). The 'reconciliation' turns into mass deception, where, as Walter Benjamin observed in the fascist mass rallies, the masses are helped to their 'expression' in a way that deprives them of their 'right' (Benjamin 1989: 382).

VII

The use that Sohn-Rethel made of his concept is a dual one. For one thing, he derives from the mercantile capitalist abstraction of value the upsurge of abstract thought in the Hellenic seaport cities of the sixth century BC; for another thing, the acute status of the problem of social synthesis. These assumptions cannot be dismissed. Only, their analytical-reductive or, as Sohn-Rethel repeatedly states, implementation as 'derivation' is poorly compatible with the principles of historical materialism. Also an unsecured change is the 'derivation', without further ado, 'of purely theoretical thought from the commodity economy' (Sohn-Rethel 1972: 90). As Klaus-Dieter Eichler has shown, the emergence of the ancient philosophical impetus toward abstraction cannot be explained by this alone, since 'the world market [...] is not a cult community of universal extent' (Eichler 2006: 35). In other words: it does not require abstraction from each individual cult community—an essential condition for the 'pure' mode of rationality that is meant.

The mistake rests upon the logical totalization of the value abstraction. This can be seen in the example of the real abstraction of abstract labour. In that its real abstraction is derived from the totality, it turns into an ideal abstraction. This is so because the logical totality is beyond any real whole. Marx thus mocks logicism in the light of reality at every opportunity. He also bridges the gap between the speculative totality and the relative, ever more renewed and decaying wholeness to be analyzed in reality with concepts of mediation and transition. What they have in common with the

concept of real abstraction is that—it should be noted: measured against traditional epistemological dualism!—they are paradoxically constructed. In *Capital* this starts with ‘individual value’ as ‘measured by the labour-time that the article costs the producer in each individual case’, and distinct from the ‘real value’ measured by ‘the labour-time socially required for its production’ (Marx 1976: 434). But socially necessary labor time is a concept of averages, resulting from the ‘simultaneous’ interaction of forces, that is to say, of forces interacting for periods of time that cannot be clearly delimited from one another. With regard to space, time, and the participation of actors, one could speak of a regional compromise that constantly fluctuates. It is not a technical magnitude, for the labor time expended in the over—or underproduction of a quantity of commodities that is too little or too much counts as socially unnecessary, and enters into the compromise as such. The concept of ‘individual value’, which is paradoxical to naive logicians, is therefore repeated at the more complex level of the third volume of *Capital* in the shape of the ‘market value’ as the ‘average value of the commodities produced in a particular sphere’ (Marx 1981: 279). This is one example of what I’ve referred to as ‘regional’. But this shape also contains too much mental abstraction, because real abstraction demands weighing the immanent differences of the ‘sphere’ concerned and the value that occurs empirically most frequently, called the modal value in statistics. In order to be logical, all temporality—and therefore its procedural character—has to be expelled from the average. Society must also be statically total, or totally static like that fictitious ‘crystal’ that according to Marx society precisely *is not*, as ‘an organism capable of change, and constantly engaged in a process of change’ (Marx 1976: 93).

In order to say that the fluctuations and transformations cannot be followed in detail in his general theory of capital, Marx uses once in the manuscript to Volume III the topos of the ‘ideal average’, relativized by an ‘as it were’ (Marx 1981: 970). It is the emblematic straw to which the logical reading of *Capital* clings in its attempts to come to terms with theoretical contradictions. It gets entangled in the latter in its attempt to evade the real contradictions. It has never occurred to anyone, even the rigorous MEGA editorial staff, to investigate the meaning of this expression. It was generally taken to mean ‘average value’, but the German expression *Durchschnitt* (average) comes from the verb *durchschneiden* (to cut through). As one can even ascertain from the Internet, the ‘ideal average’ was an illustration method commonly used in natural science in Marx’s time to represent organisms, individual organs or other complex

realities, especially the earth’s crust in the case of geology, in cross-section. In French, this is not a *moyenne*, but a *coupe transversale*. Marx was aware that by this he would have killed his object of investigation. The term in his sense must have in common with real abstraction that the mental reconstruction measures itself against the real structure of its object. He achieves this in the image of the ‘fluctuations of the barometer’. The reproduction of capitalism and producers, indeed of all members of society within it, is consummated ‘in the division of labour within society, an a posteriori necessity imposed by nature, controlling the unregulated caprice of the producers, and perceptible in the fluctuations of the barometer of market prices’ (Marx 1976: 476). ‘The possibility, therefore, of a quantitative incongruity between price and magnitude of value, i.e. the possibility that the price may diverge from the magnitude of value, is inherent in the price-form itself. This is not a defect, but, on the contrary, it makes this form the adequate one for a mode of production whose laws can only assert themselves as blindly operating averages between constant irregularities’ (idem: 197). But one should not mistake Marx for an ideology of equilibrium. It is the economic organism that reacts upon disequilibria in the opposed direction, and in a multi-dimensional structure, many of these reactive movements constantly run criss-cross.

The logical totalization of the act of circulation leads to the absurdity of denying the products of commodity production their character as commodities, denying that labor creates value, and denying products their value. The ontological peculiarity in the form of the mode of being of something to be realized (*realisandum*), which Marx expresses with the concept of determination that is fundamental for him, disappears from the standpoint of the result, which has led ‘logical’ interpretation of *Capital* to confuse ‘the realization of value with becoming real’, that is to confuse the metamorphose of value with its coming to being (Haug 2005: 159f, Fn. 55). Thus the objective determinations—here: to be sold on the one hand, to be consumed on the other—were divested of their reality or efficacy (Haug 2006: 36, 2013: 288). This in turn has contributed to the abandonment of Marx’s value theory and overall to missing the process character of Marx’s concepts (Haug 2015: 1821).

VIII

Finally, I return to the question of the reality character of real abstraction or, from the opposite side, of the abstract character of reality. Even if, according to Pablo Nocera, the reality of real abstraction has nothing in common with the '*nivel de la Wirklichkeit, de las propiedades efectivas de un objeto*' (Nocera 2005) it would, according to him, be wrong to conceive of it as an abstraction of thought. 'On the contrary, the abstraction that belongs to the scope of the exchange is external', actually happens outside, in the social world. But what is this level of reality of this world? That which Nocera approvingly quotes from Sohn-Rethel sounds like a riddle of the sphinx: '*no es pensamiento, pero guarda la forma de pensamiento*' (Sohn-Rethel 1978: 59). But what should a form of thinking be without thinking?

Nocera's criticism of Althusser is that his tearing apart of 'real object' and 'knowledge object' makes insoluble the fundamental problem of any historical-materialist epistemology of measuring concepts against the real determinations. What is at stake, then, is the specific position of Marxist thought toward reality. So far, so good. But how can we imagine the 'third element' postulated by Nocera, '*que revoluciona el campo mismo*' of Althusser's distinction? Nocera calls it, following Sohn-Rethel, 'The way of thinking before and outside of thought' (idem) and locates this form of thinking preceding thinking in the 'orden simbólico'. What speaks against this is the fact that a historical-materialistic reflection of this Lacanian concept of the 'symbolic order' would come up against the fact that the real character of the social order is nothing symbolic. In this view, social categories are not signs for anything at all, but practically self-interpreting determinations of existence. Anyone who says mother to mother is with her, is not using a symbol. Language is not a collection of signposts.

Another way suggests itself, where Sohn-Rethel says of the 'abstract' form of socialization of money-mediated commodity production: 'it is not the people who accomplish this, not they who cause this connection, but rather their actions' (Sohn-Rethel 1972: 52). That's reminiscent of the murderer's saying that he did not commit the murder; rather, his knife did. No, the key is given by the sentence quoted by Sohn-Rethel and many of those who spoke in the discussion initiated by him, with which Marx reduced the 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' (Luke, 25:34) to its worldly content: 'They don't know it, but they do it'

(Marx 1976: 166); ‘*Sie wissen es nicht, aber sie tun es*’ (MEW 23 1962: 88). And further: ‘for the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men’s social product as is their language’ (idem). But unlike language, the value form is a ‘a relation concealed beneath a veil of things’ (*unter dinglicher Hülle*; MEW 23 1962: 88, ff. 27), as Marx adds in a comment on the 2nd edition of the first volume of *Capital* to the Italian economist Ferdinando Galiano, who in the eighteenth century understood the value of goods as a ‘relation [*ragione*] between persons’ (idem: 167, ff. 29; transl. corr. WFH; Haug 2017b). What people do can be researched and then known. But in this case, knowledge does not change action, the real-abstract value form of its product ‘appears to those caught up in the relations of commodity production (and this is true both before and after the above-mentioned scientific discovery) to be just as ultimately valid’ (ibid.), for it is the form of movement of the contradiction of private production based upon social division of labor, in which every producing actor ‘produces for society represented by the “market”, but always only lines his own pocket’ (Haug 2005: I, XI.1).³

In order to further clarify the questions raised here, it is essential to proceed from the ‘*capovolgimento pratico della teorica della conoscenza*’. Antonio Labriola, the historical founder of Marxist philosophizing, emphatically points out that this ‘practical revolution of epistemology’ (Labriola 1973: 206), or ‘*la inversione pratica del problema della conoscibilità*’ (idem: 224) is contained in historical materialism. The relatively few to whom the name Labriola means something still know him as a provider of keywords to Antonio Gramsci, without accounting for the fact that Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks* he became the philosophical executor of Labriola’s project of a Marxist Philosophy of Praxis. Labriola’s thesis that this philosophy is immanent in the things about which it philosophizes, indeed that the critique of political economy follows the ‘self-criticism’ of the social relations, leads him to conceive of it as the source or ‘marrow’ of historical materialism. In practice, he argues with primary attention on material work, active thinking or thinking action is with the things themselves, albeit not yet in scientific form. Experimental scientific research he understands as a special form of material work aiming at such knowledge. It is only in this being with the things themselves that the path to the reconstruction of the concrete in thought is found. Their peculiar way of being originates in the interweavements and dynamic autonomizations resulting from their social massiveness and from their criss-crossing

and superimposing on one another in relation to what is targeted by the individual actors. It may be reflected in the symbolic order, but does not result from it; rather, the relevant modification of the latter results from the former. Common sense knows ‘in principle’ about some of it, and it has at least an inkling of other aspects; finding out the rest is a matter of historical–social–theoretical research. This can be studied paradigmatically in Labriola’s own ‘research on trial’, in which he critically develops the all too direct and complexity-simplifying teachings of the late Engels, his admired correspondence partner—for example on the history of Christianity (Labriola 1912: 118).

(To be continued)

This article was translated by Alex Locascio.

NOTES

1. In view of the Lassallian formula, Marx speaks of the ‘iron law of wages’ in the Gotha Programme of the young German social democracy. The adjective ‘iron’—he himself used it in the *Preface* to the first edition of *Capital* (Marx and Engels 35 2010b: 9; MEW 23 1962: 12)—suggests precise knowledge of the ‘objective laws of social development’ and phrases the place where further analysis is needed. So recently the word ‘logical’ as supposed key to the method of the Marxian main work.
2. In the French edition: ‘*l’expression de valeur*’ (Marx 1969) [1872]: 17).
3. Marx’s talk of the ‘semblance of objectivity’ (Marx 1976: 167) of the fetish character of the commodity (MEW 23 1862: 88) is therefore unfortunate, because ‘semblance’ [*Schein*] suggests that one can scare it away by enlightenment. Pablo Nocera rightly adheres to Marx’s realization that the fetish character of the commodity, the other face of value abstraction in *motu*, ‘has an autonomous existence that does not depend on the knowledge that the subjects have of it’ (Nocera 2005). But this is contradicted by the sentence that it is about ‘A type of reality that is only possible on condition that the individuals who are immersed in it are not aware of their own logic’ (idem). However, the relations of production as one with the relations of property are not a question of consciousness, even if many people are under the spell of bourgeois ideology and reinforced by the power of facts, are either unaware of it or push aside the thought of it in the certainty that they cannot change anything.

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Real Abstraction in the History of the Natural Sciences

Peter McLaughlin and Oliver Schlaudt

TECHNOLOGY AND SCIENCE

What is the relation of science and technology? A common view is that technology applies science—the view is sometimes even radicalized as: Science is pursued for the sake of technology. Francis Bacon is often cited in this connection: ‘Nature to be conquered must be obeyed’.¹ The natural interpretation of this slogan is that, if you want to dominate nature, you should pursue science, learn nature’s laws, and then obey them in their application to technology. But we can also read the relation in the other direction and say that since we do in fact regularly conquer nature in technology, we must have been implicitly obeying her laws all the time; and thus our technology already embodies natural laws. If we study what is done in technology, we can learn about the laws of nature. Furthermore, this view allows us to avoid speculations about the noble—or ignoble—motives of individual scientists and to concentrate on the structural determinants of social action (cf. Merton 1939). The interpretation of nature

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in terms of technology or the view of the world as a machine is an integral part of the early modern scientific world view. The metaphor of the clockwork universe is compatible with both versions of Bacon's dictum: science can be pursued *for the sake of* technology, but science can also be pursued *on the basis of* technology.

The view of technology as the source rather than the goal of science is articulated by Galileo Galilei in the opening lines of his *Discorsi* of 1638:

Frequent experience of your famous arsenal, my Venetian friends, seems to me to open a large field to speculative minds for philosophizing, and particularly in that area which is called mechanics, inasmuch as every sort of instrument and machine is continually put in operation there. (Galilei 1974: 11)

Galileo visited the Arsenal in Venice, not to build better ships but to 'philosophize', that is, to use his training in Aristotelian natural philosophy and Archimedean mathematics to study technology and thereby learn about nature.

This Galilean perspective on the relation of science and technology was at the core of Marxist historiography of science in the first half of the twentieth century as represented by Boris Hessen and Henryk Grossmann.² Early historiography of science had made it clear that in spite of all the proclamations in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on the utility of science for the improvement of production and the wealth of society, it was only in the nineteenth century that science actually became useful for production. Whereas traditional historians concluded that technology was, therefore, irrelevant to an explanation of the Scientific Revolution of the early modern age,³ Hessen and Grossmann viewed technology not as the final cause of science but as the material basis of an experimental exploration of nature. They saw in the development of (especially mechanical) technology the basis and determining factor for the subsequent emergence of a science of mechanics. To give an example, the production norm of a transmission mechanism such as a clockwork expresses an abstract notion of friction-free motion. This abstract notion is in a sense already embodied in the technology as such.

What we are interested in here is the extent to which science can be viewed as the analysis of technique/technology and the extent to which the analysis of technology can be seen as the articulation or conceptualization of the 'real' abstractions performed by technology. When we ask what can be learned about nature or the study of nature from various human practices, the concept of *real abstraction* might be useful, even if used in a

different way than it has been used in sociology. We shall propose a notion of real abstraction for the study of the nature and history of the natural sciences, especially with regard to their relation to technological practice.

REAL ABSTRACTION

The term ‘real abstraction’ was brought to currency by Alfred Sohn-Rethel in *Intellectual and Manual Labour* (1978) to describe the fact that in the exchange of goods people actually, but in general not consciously, abstract from the use value of the commodity which they trade away. This means that in the exchange itself, a commodity is used only as a means for obtaining a different commodity, not as a means to the end that defines its own use value or utility. The commodity is so to speak ‘frozen’ into pure quantity and immutable substance. Even if the people involved in the exchange of goods are not conscious of the abstraction from the commodity’s use value, the abstraction still constitutes an objective feature of their actions. In this sense the abstraction is *real* as opposed to being effected merely in thought. This phenomenon is of philosophical importance according to Sohn-Rethel because he holds the real abstraction, once the exchange of goods becomes a widespread practice in a society, to impose a certain view of the world on the members of this society. Real abstraction is thus similar to the Kantian categories that structure experience or like a looking-glass which shows us an image of the world in terms of numbers and general laws.

The mechanism by which the real abstraction that takes place in exchange is translated into categories of thought, however, remains mysterious, as has been noted by many critics (e.g. Falk 1977: 393–394). We think, nonetheless, that the notion of real abstraction can be made useful for understanding the history of the natural sciences, and we will offer a reading that permits us to use this concept without having to rely on such obscurities. The basic idea is to view the exchange of commodities, from which Sohn-Rethel derived the real abstraction, as just one special case of a more general process of real abstraction. Thus any abstraction that is carried out so to speak by hand rather than merely in thought may be called a real abstraction.

Marx himself provides an instructive example. In the first chapter of *Capital* Marx explains how in exchange one commodity, which in itself is simply one particular use value among others, becomes the *expression* of the economic value of another commodity: ‘use value becomes the form of manifestation, the phenomenal form of its opposite, value. The bodily

form of the commodity becomes its value form'. Marx illustrates this point by comparing the exchange of goods of equal value to establishing an equilibrium on the balance between objects of the same weight. He then goes on saying (Marx and Engels 1975: 35, 66–67):

A sugar-loaf being a body, is heavy, and therefore has weight: but we can neither see nor touch this weight. We then take various pieces of iron, whose weight has been determined beforehand. The iron, as iron, is no more the form of manifestation of weight, than is the sugar-loaf. Nevertheless, in order to express the sugar-loaf as so much weight, we put it into a weight-relation with the iron. In this relation, the iron officiates as a body representing nothing but weight. A certain quantity of iron therefore serves as the measure of the weight of the sugar, and represents, in relation to the sugar-loaf, weight embodied, the form of manifestation of weight. This part is played by the iron only within this relation, into which the sugar or any other body, whose weight has to be determined, enters with the iron. Were they not both heavy, they could not enter into this relation, and the one could therefore not serve as the expression of the weight of the other. When we throw both into the scales, we see in reality, that as weight they are both the same, and that, therefore, when taken in proper proportions, they have the same weight. Just as the substance iron, as a measure of weight, represents in relation to the sugar-loaf weight alone, so, in our expression of value, the material object, coat, in relation to the linen, represents value alone.

Here Marx establishes an analogy between economic value and physical weight. Let us isolate the crucial elements. We start with some given concrete objects, say pieces of iron and sugar-loafs. These objects can be put in different kinds of relations: We can trade iron for a sugar-loaf in an exchange. Within such an exchange relation, the pieces of iron are reduced to economic value, or more precisely, to the bodily manifestation of the economic value of the sugar-loaf they are to be exchanged for. Similarly, we can put both kinds of objects on a balance, first the sugar-loaf in the one pan and then add iron pieces in the other until equilibrium is reached. Now, the pieces of iron have been reduced to embodiments of weight or, more precisely, to the expression of the weight of the sugar-loaf in the opposite pan of the balance.

The key to our approach is that, in exchange, goods are not reduced to pure quantity, as Sohn-Rethel would have it, but to the (the expression of) economic value, that is, the quantity of the qualitative dimension, economic value. Once this is taken into account, it becomes clear that weight is analogous to value. Of course, Marx carefully determines the limits of

this analogy: weight is a ‘natural’ property whereas economic value is purely ‘social’. This difference, however, does not affect the possibility we want to explore in this paper: namely that both properties, weight and value, are the outcome of analogous types of abstractions. The categorical difference between ‘natural’ and ‘social’ properties simply reflects corresponding categorical differences between the underlying material processes of abstraction: on the one hand, the balance, a physical device, and on the other, commodity exchange, a cultural practice. Indeed, what Marx actually describes in the passage cited above is that, when we put concrete objects on the balance, we reduce them to their character as weights and abstract from all other properties. For the engineer this perspective is quite normal. From an engineering point of view, an object is a multidimensional causal actor, interacting with its environment in various ways: by reflecting and absorbing light, through direct contact and through various kinds of forces acting at a distance through fields (electric, magnetic and gravitational). A balance in this perspective is a particular material arrangement which ‘filters’ modes of interaction. The balance reacts to weight but not to color, odor or electric charge. It thus *really* carries out an abstraction from various properties, that is, it effects a *real* abstraction.

Thus Marx’s analysis of the exchange relation, from which Sohn-Rethel derives the concept of real abstraction, can also be seen as the analysis of an equivalence relation *on the example of* the exchange of commodities. From this perspective we have an analysis that applies more generally and points to a more general form of abstraction that also occurs in other areas of human practice. We agree with Sohn-Rethel in his attempt to locate the source of key abstractions in human thought in the real abstractions made in human practice, but we reject his restriction of the forms of practice to those of commodity exchange. There are multifarious examples of real abstraction in technological practice. Furthermore, Sohn-Rethel’s distinction between the *form* of science (determined by the exchange abstraction) and the *content* of science (determined by problems derived from production) is not fruitful for the analysis of science (Sohn-Rethel 1976: 45/6). Sohn-Rethel allowed the content of science to be derived from the sphere of production but insisted that the theory form of science was due exclusively to the distribution sphere. Thus, he was unable to envision real abstraction in production—or anywhere but commodity exchange.

The aim of our contribution is to discuss the extent to which abstraction, understood in this way, can be regarded as a common phenomenon in the history of science, and thus as a useful key to concept formation in

the sciences. The view which we want to put forward in this paper is that things happened in the opposite way as usually conceived. That is, from an historical perspective, the device, embodying a real abstraction, often comes first and only afterwards is the concept of the quality it instantiates derived.

AN EXAMPLE: THE LAW OF THE LEVER

In what follows we shall examine a real abstraction on the example of the first mechanical law, the law of the lever, showing how some basic concepts of science were formed by studying technology, namely the balance with unequal arms.

If the concept of real abstraction is to help us give a satisfying account of the emergence of a new concept, there are two main questions that have to be addressed: (1) In what sense can a technical device ‘be there’ without first being invented in order to serve the specific purpose that gives it its name? (2) Under what circumstances are the real abstractions embodied in technical devices discovered and translated into corresponding concepts? We shall deal with both questions in our example.

The Law of the Lever, which posits the inverse proportionality of weights and lengths on a lever/balance in equilibrium, was first formulated near the end of the fourth century BC in the Peripatetic short treatise, *Mechanical Problems*, written by Aristotle (1936) or one of his better disciples.⁴ This work is the first documented example of a sustained theoretical reflection on mechanical knowledge in Europe. Although the text that has come down to us is a hodge-podge of disparate topics thrown together, parts of the work also contain an ambitious program of theoretical investigation of technical devices, reducing each of them to the lever and the lever to a balance with unequal arms—and then the balance arms are reduced to radii of circles.

The aim of the *Mechanical Problems* is to explain why technical devices work—and also to show that their success is compatible with Aristotle’s physics—although the latter goal appears to be secondary. What is shown again and again is that technical devices can be made intelligible on the model of the balance, the lever and the circle. Particular concrete objects and relations are taken as instantiations of abstracted concepts and relations: an oar or a mast is a lever; a nutcracker is two levers fixed together, long boards bend more than short ones because they are like levers farther from the fulcrum. All these devices can be analyzed in terms of lever, load,

fulcrum and force. What the author does is to develop general abstract concepts in the study of technical devices which embody these abstractions. Theoretical analysis (science) arises here in a particular kind of study of technique.

A special role in the construction of the *Mechanical Problems* is played by the balance with unequal arms. This asymmetric balance, which became common in Greece after the mid-fifth century, had a fixed counter-weight and a moveable suspension point, which could be adjusted until the beam reached equilibrium—unlike later Roman devices with a moveable counterweight. This device is characterized as at once a balance and a lever. As a balance, it establishes equilibrium or equality in which counteracting forces mutually cancel out each other's effects. And as a lever, it allows a smaller weight (on the longer arm) to balance or overcome a greater weight. In the *Mechanical Problems*, the asymmetric balance provides the point of departure and the model for the cognitive development realized in the treatise.

There are many technical devices embodying some form compensation of weight by length or length by weight. The *shadoof*, a long pole with a bucket on one end and a counterweight on the other, had long been in use in Mesopotamia and Egypt in irrigation to lift water from a river or a basin. The Macedonian army under Aristotle's employer Phillip, by putting counterweights on its long spear (*sarissa*), was able to increase the effective length of the spear without reducing the maneuverability of the phalanx. All such devices embody a 'complementarity' of weight and distance and make the experience possible that weights are balanced not only by other weights (as in the symmetric balance) but also by lengths. The abstraction from the dimensional difference between length and weight is made by the device itself. The subsequent question will then be: When and how is this real abstraction intellectually recognized and appropriated in thought.

The answer to our first question as to how a technical device can 'be there' without first being intended to serve the specific purpose that gives it its name, hence simply, is that the device first served a different purpose, as is exemplified by the *shadoof* and the *sarissa*. This answer probably holds in general. Any material device can be used for various ends, including ends they were not originally intended. A similar phenomenon is known in evolutionary biology as *exaptation*. Biologists Gould and Vrba (1982) introduced this term to account for traits that evolved for one function and were later adapted for another. The French archaeologist, Sophie de

Beaune has applied this term to technological invention in prehistory in order to account for more complex inventions without having to refer to pure chance or ingeniousness (2008: 83). Finally the dialectics of means and ends also applies to commodity exchange: People discover that goods can also be used for acquiring different goods, that is, that they have an exchange value. Understanding ‘real abstraction’ in the way, we suggest, thus demands that we identify an original end, which was served by the tool, and which led to the practice with the device that created the real abstraction.

But let us get back to Aristotle and asymmetric balance in order to think about the second question, under what circumstances are the real abstractions embodied in technical devices discovered and translated into corresponding concepts?

Due to their military and architectural activities, the Greeks possessed practical mechanical knowledge of the simple machines and the planning knowledge needed for their application. And counterweights, which practically embody the complementarity of weight and distance (or provide a real abstraction from their difference), were common in ancient Greece. Any such device could in the right context have occasioned theoretical investigations. But there are good reasons why the asymmetric balance provided that occasion. As a lever and balance at the same time, the asymmetric balance embodies two conflicting notions. It is a lever, that is a machine that allows a smaller force to conquer a greater force and thus tricks nature by (seemingly) getting more out than it puts in. However it is also a balance and thus is a machine for establishing equality of weight (equilibrium). As long as these different practices are separate, the conflict need not become a problem. But in the context of Aristotle’s project of cataloguing and analyzing practices in order to integrate them into an encompassing system of knowledge, the conflict has to be dealt with. A concept was needed that permitted the reconciliation of the lever and the balance by identifying the equal within the unequal, the equality of cause and effect when the smaller weight overcomes the larger one. The concept of weight is a real abstraction embodied in the symmetric balance, and the notion of ‘inclination’ (*rhopê*) or momentum, denoting the combined effects of weight and length, could be discovered on any counterweight devices. But the real abstraction in the asymmetric balance is much more complex than the simple complementarity of the *sarissa* and simply equality of the standard balance. The asymmetric balance embodies the equality

of inclination, which can be formulated as the law of the lever, when we discover the real abstraction in this device.

This answer to this second question differs in nature from the answer to the first question. First, it is less likely to be generalized. Whereas the first answer hinted at a dialectics of means and ends which might turn out to be quite general in cultural and even in natural evolution, the second answer made it necessary to tell a highly specific story about the circumstances under which the law of the lever was discovered. A second difference consists in the fact that the story told in the second answer, referring to logical constraints of Aristotle's intellectual project, resembles much more traditional history of ideas. We insist however that we do not intend to engage in traditional history of ideas. On the contrary, we suggest a model of discovery in science driven by developments in technology. In order to fully understand discovery in science, that is, to provide a full historical account rather than to gesture at a general scheme, the relevant technological developments must be studied in the specific cultural context which triggered the discovery of real abstractions embodied in existing technological devices and practices.

CONCLUSION

The use of the concept of real abstraction in the history of science presupposes that technical devices can be studied to recognize such real abstractions and thus that the development of technology has a role in determining the direction of scientific development—not as the final cause but as the material basis or subject matter of science. Boris Hessen pointed to the striking fact that the development of physics in the nineteenth century from mechanics to thermodynamics to electrodynamics did not follow any a priori immanent logic of physics but rather followed the actual development of technology.⁵

It is worth mentioning that Sohn-Rethel is one of the few critics of Hessen or Grossmann to correctly describe their view of the relation of science and technology. In fact he criticized them specifically for believing that science arises *out of* technology not *for the sake of* technology: 'The argumentation therefore leads involuntarily to the strange view that machines generate natural sciences rather than the reverse'. And in another paper he sharpens the critique: 'After all, it is science that helps to build machines, rather than the machines hatching out science, even mechanistic science'.⁶ Sohn Rethel was one of the few to understand the thrust of

the analyses of Hessen and Grossmann, but he failed to see the fruitfulness of their position because he restricted real abstraction to the distribution sphere. If there is a real abstraction in technique, then of course the machines (with our help) can ‘hatch out’ science. This disregard for the production sphere reflects a more general disdain of instrumental reason, common in the Frankfurt School, which hinders any serious analysis of the intellectual opportunities offered by the second reading of Bacon’s dictum, which hints at a general dialectics of means and ends. Instrumental reason need not be restricted to searching for appropriate means for given ends, as Horkheimer would have it (1947: 3–4), but can also discover new ends contained in given means as real abstractions.

NOTES

1. ‘Natura enim non nisi parendo vincitur’ (Bacon [1620] 1858, Bk. I, §3).
2. Hessen (*Social and Economic Roots*) cites the opening lines of the *Discorsi* as his first appendix. On the historical work of Hessen and Grossmann see Freudenthal and McLaughlin (2009).
3. See especially Koyré (1943, 1948).
4. For a detailed account of this work and of the role Greek balances see Renn and McLaughlin (2018).
5. See Hessen in Freudenthal and McLaughlin (2009: 78–82).
6. Sohn-Rethel (1973a: 85, 1973b: 37). A long footnote on Hessen and Grossmann was not included in the English version of the book (1978).

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Zapatista Autonomy: The Invention of Time as a Discontinuity and Untotaling Category

Sergio Tischler

INTRODUCTION

Time in capitalism is a secularized and reified category. It is the expression of a praxis determined by the power of general labor or abstract labor over concrete labor, that is, a praxis whose synthesis is produced with Money as a means (Sohn Rethel 2001. Tr.¹). As a part of the form of value, time is made of an objective abstraction, a real one, and it is also an alienated category for domination. It is in no way neutral or detached from class antagonism.

The revolutions which evolved from the so-called real socialism were incapable of changing time in a radical manner, of generating a time emancipated from that abstract and objective form, which would be an expression of collective self-determination of society. Those revolutions failed as projects of human emancipation, and a central part of that failure concerns that matter.²

Zapatismo was able to relocate the matter of anti-capitalist revolution as the central human concern. It is not done from evocation of a

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revolutionary history whose concept became a theoretical wreck, but assuming that the challenge of changing the world in terms of praxis implies new ways of thinking, feeling and making the change. It is from that perspective that we formulate the following questions, which motivated our composition.

Is the Zapatista autonomy a process which seeks for a creative destruction of the capitalist domination based in the centrality of money in the social relations? To what extent is this process a simultaneous criticism of the capitalist state, the state in general and of politics as a part of it? In what sense can we talk of Zapatista autonomy as a beginning of a possible world of human self-determination where 'many worlds fit'? To what extent is that beginning a territory and a time where the objectified dominant praxis and the abstract universality which implies the violence of homogeneity as the means of subjugation typical of mercantile relations and of the state are broken, denied and destroyed? To what extent is there a breakup in the reproduction of capital and the domination based on real abstractions such as money and the fetishism which is consubstantial to it? In what sense it goes further than revolution as state-centered way of politics? Will it be possible to read that experience in the *time* of *zapatismo* and, in particular, in the autonomy time that they propose?

We cannot rehearse sufficiently argued answers; at least, we risk the hypothetical consideration of some general approaches.

ZAPATISTA PRACTICE AND TIME

One of the most relevant aspects of *zapatismo* is its commitment to the breaking of time as a vertical time of domination of social relations and the institutions derived from this. They have not thought or expressed it on those terms, but that perspective is sketched in their idea of non-avant-gardist revolution; it is shown in the horizontal practices of the autonomy in the Juntas de Buen Gobierno (*Councils of Good Government*), and it is expressed in their language where the subject is an *anti-capitalist rebellious we*, in which the speech is a fight against hegemony as an expression of domination. The Zapatista fight—paradoxical, as they like to label it—does not insist on a new kind of power, but it criticizes and denies power as an expression of 'high and low'—to speak their language—that is, of power as a relation of domination and subjugation of a praxis determined by capital.

Since their first public appearance, EZLN's (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional) communications outlined the idea that revolution, understood as an avant-garde taking the power, does not guarantee the transformation of the world, and that radical change comes from below, from a movement of self-organization which makes the power of capital, vertical and homogeneous, explode into an experience of collective fight for the creation of a horizontal time. According to them, this movement is the only assurance of the suppression of a power as a relation of domination.

In some manner, what they suggest is like saying that the historical criticism of the classic revolutionary subject of the socialist revolutions of the past century was suspended with the establishment of the state power and that such an establishment was the closure of the self-determinative collective movement which gave life to the revolutions. This implied, among other things, an act of denial of the revolution from below, from the rebels moved by the collective dream of social and individual emancipation, however dim it may have been. In other words, in the new constellation of power represented by the state synthesis of revolution, politics is reinstalled as a vertical time-space of domination.

Susan Buck-Morss presents a picture of this antagonism on the stage of the Russian Revolution. When she refers to the relation between the avant-garde (party) and the different movements of the revolutionary torrent, she says:

Mass support existed for the October events, but it was not of a single mind. Millennialists, avant-gardists, and utopian dreamers of every sort were eager to interpret the revolutionary future as their own. Bolshevism needed to speak for all of these people, structuring their desires inside a historical continuum that, at the same time, contained their force. In the process of being inserted into the temporal narrative of revolutionary history, the utopian dimension of a wide variety of discourses was constrained and reduced. (Buck-Morss 2004: 62)

The hegemony of the state-centered time of the party became the antithesis of time as an open category, self-determinative, experimental, that is to say, as a horizontal experience, exactly as the artistic avant-garde sensed it.

The effect was to rupture the continuity of time—states Buck-Morss—opening it up to new cognitive and sensory experiences. In contrast, the party submitted to a historical cosmology that provided no such freedom

of movement. Bolshevism's claim to know the course of history in its totality presumed a 'science' of the future that encouraged revolutionary politics to dictate to art. Culture was to be operationalized. Its products would serve 'progress' as the latter's visual representation (Buck-Morss 2004: 67).

A more dramatic history happened to the *soviets*, as is widely known.

Having this experience in mind, we believe to see in zapatismo a commitment to overcome that contradiction of the revolution. Zapatismo is oriented to open the process and the idea of revolution questioning the idea of avant-garde and of hegemony, that is, the canon of the classic revolutionary subject. It is remarkable that zapatismo is a revolutionary movement that rejects fighting as a means to rise to power; nonetheless, this does not imply an abstract rejection to the state, as if it were possible to suggest the matter of revolution based on an empty contentless denial of it. Their commitment—we think—is for the creation of a government that is the expression of an inclusive and deliberative 'below and to the left', that is to say, the expression of a moment of the horizontal movement of the social relations, that is, a commitment for a revolutionary government that is at the same time the denial of the state as a political form of capital (Bonefeld 2013. Tr.).

Autonomy as an ethical and moral horizon of political praxis is not then a naïf conception of the world transformation. An image can be found in their horizon, of horizontality as a movement, which makes the dominio relation of capital and the state explode. It is the commitment for a kind of politics that is the antithesis of left politics as a part of the *state form*.³ And a central aspect of it is the breakup of the vertical and horizontal time of domination. Zapatismo rejects the domestication of time in a new synthesis of state power.

This movement represents a hard, difficult and contradictory effort of 'asking we walk', which is little or not related to the fantasy inspired by the fetish of spontaneity.⁴ Zapatismo, and its autonomy as a fundamental key of their political praxis, is a commitment for a *time other* in the fight against fatality and destiny: against the fatality of accepting the capitalist world as the only one possible, as a vertical universal human destiny, with the false image as a background of utopia leading to the bitter nightmare of Stalinism in its various manners.

The revolutions of the so-called real socialism—which implied the defeat of the revolution from below marking a constitutive reactionary moment of the emerging state power—became a historical *ruin* which

carried along with its debris the idea of revolution. Maybe the great achievement of zapatismo was rescuing the idea of revolution and of hope from that ruined condition. It created an imaginary space for thinking the change of the world in a different and fresh fashion, fed by an image of revolution against the model that made its vertical and state-centered manner hegemonic.

However, this idea of radical change does not imply the establishment of a new model of revolution, neither the projection of a fixed image of the future which must be achieved, unfolding some kind of sustained truth in a series of partial assertions. On the contrary, it's a commitment to open and expand the category of revolution with the perspective that revolution is a contradictory process exposed to the traps of the demise of history in the different syntheses of power, and that the constitutive subjectivity of those syntheses for the left is found in the idea of an avant-garde, which presents the future as a fight for hegemony and the historical totaling of time. The Zapatista expressions 'A world where many worlds fit' and 'Asking we walk' are telling us about a different fighting experience, an experience where the image of the time does not refer to a social relationship of domination/subjugation as a result of the process of totaling and subsumption of the concrete under the abstract.

Zapatismo rejects the image of time as hegemony, that is to say, the image of time as a universal idea that is the denial of human self-determination, just as it is presented by the social experience determined by the power of money in capitalism, or by vertical and coercive organization of social labor from state bureaucracy in the experiences of 'real socialism'.⁵ In that sense, the Zapatista experience is a radical criticism of the universal as an abstraction and as a form of power which arises and breeds from the denial of social self-determination and from the assertion of the world as social and class antagonism. However, it is a paradoxical criticism. The paradox is presented by the image of a revolutionary army which rose up to deny itself, whose aspiration is to disappear and not planting firmly as an expression of power. The struggle of the EZLN is a struggle to create a political time-space where the armed organization is no longer necessary in the fight for emancipation. It considers itself as a moment—not the main moment—of this process.

This idea can be extended to the initiatives related to other anti-capitalist movements of the country. The Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle of June 2005 can be an example. In these initiatives, it is intended that the struggles are not only reduced to participate with specific requests in a

collective process that moves surpassing the institutional frame of Mexican politics. The struggle is simultaneously the development of a process of collective self-consciousness. It is going beyond what we are and creating a *we*, which is not the non-critical addition of the struggles in a common field, but which implies a movement of self-criticism oriented to the denial of the mala praxis of which we are or can be carriers.

In that sense, zapatismo does not think of itself as an expression of some kind of pure subject, denied by the power of capital and, that sense, needing only to develop its own power to be able to change the world. Everything indicates that they realize that we are traversed by power and domination, and that the fight is also an inner fight of the subject. So that the revolutionary practice would imply a double movement of denial: the denial of capitalist relations such as material, objective relations and the denial of the power subjectivity internalized in our minds.

This *we* is tense, distressing and, to some extent, it is uncertain. It is not something given and defined beforehand; it is like the expression of a hypothetical experience of full emancipation. From such a kind of experience, we only have historical glimmers, and we cannot be comforted by theory for such an absence as it was once believed.⁶ To sum up, we are talking about a *we-in-process*, in no way a *we-fixed form*⁷ as the fetishized categories of people and nation.⁸

Is the Zapatista-we a new way to understand revolution and class struggle?

We believe, in that sense, that the Zapatista experience allows for the understanding of class struggle and revolution in an untotalling manner, as we have stated it in previous essays (Tischler 2013).

What does this mean? What is its relation with the topic of the suppression of time as an objective abstraction and a relation of domination?

TIME AS OBJECTIVE ABSTRACTION AND DOMINATION

We owe to E.P. Thomson one of the best descriptions about the historical process of time transformation into an objectified category.

‘In the Canterbury Tales, the cock still appears in its most important role as nature’s clock’, he says. ‘Over the development of the 17th century, the image of the clock mechanism is extended, and absorbed by the universe thanks to Newton’. And in the eighteenth century, it has already entered intimate levels of everyday life (Thompson 1979: 239–241).

But it is in industrial capitalism when time becomes autonomous from the natural immediate determinations and acquires the characteristics of

objectivity with the rationality of the merchandise form of the social relations.

The contrast between ‘time in nature’ and ‘time in the clock’—which is a symbol of the time of capitalism—is presented by Thompson explaining a contrast between ‘task-oriented’ time and the time of the factory. As an example of the first—he says—‘the patterning of social time in the seaport follows upon the rhythms of the sea; and this appears to be natural and comprehensible to fisher-men or seamen: the compulsion is nature’s own’. ‘In a similar way labour from dawn to dusk can appear to be’ natural ‘in a farming community, especially in the harvest months: nature demands that the grain be harvested before the thunderstorms set in’. In general terms, we can say that:

The notation of time which arises in such contexts has been described as task-orientation. It is perhaps the most effective orientation in peasant societies, and it remains important in village and domestic industries. (...) Three points may be proposed about task-orientation. First, there is a sense in which it is more humanly comprehensible than timed labour. The peasant or labourer appears to attend upon what is an observed necessity. Second, a community in which task-orientation is common appears to show least demarcation between “labour” and “life”. Social intercourse and labour are intermingled—the working-day lengthens or contracts according to the task—and there is no great sense of conflict between labour and “passing the time of day”. Third, to men accustomed to labour timed by the clock, this attitude to labour appears to be wasteful and lacking in urgency. (Thompson 1979: 245)

On the contrary, at the factory, the ‘economy of time’ is pursued, and it is achieved through a disciplinary system which tyrannically controls the activity of the laborers so they don’t ‘waste time’ and are productive. ‘It was exactly in those industries—the textile mills and the engineering workshops—where the new time-discipline was most rigorously imposed that the contest over time became most intense’ (Idem: 278).

In those conditions, the struggle for time arises as one the significant axes of the class struggle. ‘The first generation of factory workers were taught by their masters the importance of time; the second generation formed their short-time committees in the ten-hour movement; the third generation struck for overtime or time-and-a-half’ (Idem: 279–280).

Thompson also detected how social change, in terms of development, was the expression of time as an antithesis of social self-determination, that

is, time as imposed and internalized discipline. 'Without time-discipline we could not have the insistent energies of industrial man; and whether this discipline comes in the forms of Methodism, or of Stalinism, or of nationalism, it will come to the developing world' (Idem: 289).

E.P. Thompson's historical analysis of time and discipline in capitalism is a vivid and brilliant exposition of the matter from the non-orthodox Marxist perspective and exceeds what we have recently exposed here.

Anyway, there are some aspects of the matter that the author does not touch, and which are important for us. For instance, his version of time can be understood in the sense of a disciplinary and instrumental form used by capitalists: they control and rationalize time because 'time is gold'. For that reason, we think it is necessary to add to this argument the position that capitalists are also controlled by time. Not because they are exploited like the laborers, but because they are subject to a time they do not control and which determines them. This leads us to the matter of time as an abstraction and objectivity in capitalism, that is to say, the matter of time as a part of *the value form* of the social relations. In fact, it could be said that Thompson makes a thorough and brilliant description of the experience of time and its representation in capitalism, but he does not enter directly into the analysis of the category in itself. This analysis is found in Marx.

The matter of time in Marx, particularly in *Capital*, covers from the initial chapter about commodities and the dual character of labor until he reaches the law of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall.⁹ As a punctual analysis in the class struggle, the topic is present in the historical analysis explained in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* and *The Civil war in France*. In this chapter, it is enough to state that time, as a social objective category, abstract and homogeneous, develops in capitalism, and that this development is tied to a praxis determined by general labor or abstract labor, which is a specific category of capital.

To broaden the argument a little bit, we are analyzing time as a part of the *form of value* or *the form of commodity* of the social relations. Such a form is the way of existence of an objectivity which is the result of an abstraction produced in the material practice of social reproduction: 'social substance common to them all' or general labor or abstract labor.

In the first chapter of *Capital* (Commodities), Marx presents the difference between their physical materiality (use value) and the strict social objectivity (value) of the commodity in terms of the distinction between concrete forms of labor and abstract forms of labor. He says:

As use values, commodities are, above all, of different qualities, but as exchange values they are merely different quantities, and consequently do not contain an atom of use value. (Marx 1975: 46)

And he continues:

If then we leave out of consideration the use value of commodities, they have only one common property left, that of being products of labour. But even the product of labour itself has undergone a change in our hands. If we make abstraction from its use value, we make abstraction at the same time from the material elements and shapes that make the product a use value; we see in it no longer a table, a house, yarn, or any other useful thing. Its existence as a material thing is put out of sight. Neither can it any longer be regarded as the product of the labour of the joiner, the mason, the spinner, or of any other definite kind of productive labour. Along with the useful qualities of the products themselves, we put out of sight both the useful character of the various kinds of labour embodied in them, and the concrete forms of that labour; there is nothing left but what is common to them all; all are reduced to one and the same sort of labour, human labour in the abstract. (Marx 1975: 46–47)

Marx refers to abstract labor as a real abstraction, an abstraction in the kingdom of things, in the object, which ‘escapes the thought of those who make them’ (Sohn Rethel 2001: 35. Tr.). It produces behind the back of those who make them because of the mercantile form where money works as a social synthesizer (Sohn Rethel 2001: 28–50. Tr.). It is in that sense that it is important to understand real abstraction as a living and moving substance.

This ‘social substance common to them all’ represents unconscious universal mediation of the relations among the individuals. As Postone says:

it is a relation characterized by the universal form of commodities (...) an individual does not purchase goods produced by others through manifest social relations. Instead, labour itself—both directly and what is expressed through the products—replaces those relations working as the “objective” means by which other people’s products can be purchased. *Labour in itself is a social means in place of open social relations.* (Postone 2006: 213. Tr.)

Social mediation is produced because abstract labor, labor distilled as time, acquires the characteristics of a *totality*, something that only occurs in capitalist relations.

Totality is manifest in *forms*: commodity form, money-form, state form (Holloway 2002). Among other things, this allows us to understand labor as a category which goes further than economics and implies politics and the state in a non-external way; that is to say, it must be understood that the separation of economics from politics in capitalism is a relation mediated by social relations.

In other words, abstract labor, a category which carries totality as a characteristic, is a key concept to understand the unity of the diverse in capitalism, in terms of an abstract universal which subdues and subsumes the particular into a violent homogeneity (Adorno 1975. Tr.)—that time is a moving totality, a living rationality, and expresses itself in particular forms. This means that the forms of time in economics are forms of the homogeneous time of totality; they are forms of a time ‘empty of material realities which constitute its content in scope of use’ (Sohn Rethel 2001: 52. Tr.). Moreover, the time in politics and the time of the capitalist state cannot be understood in critical terms outside of that kind of abstraction, of that ‘empty’ time represented by the symbol of money.

Among other things, this explains how capitalism got firm as an ‘abstract community’, meaning a community in denial of a ‘concrete community’ of human beings, since ‘money is immediately a *community*, as it is the universal substance in everyone’s existence. But in money (...) the community is for the individual a mere abstraction, a mere external accidental thing, and at the same time a simple means for his satisfaction as a private individual’ (Marx 1971: 160–161. Tr.). This implies, at the same time, that what we think is individuality is the consequence of the internalization of a great deal of violence.¹⁰

In such a way is praxis determined by abstract labor that it is objectified in an abstract and homogeneous time, which is at the same time a domination category. This praxis has a material substrate the radical separation of the subject from the object presented in the figure of the laborer as a vendor of working force, that is to say, as some kind of living abstraction.¹¹

The phrase ‘time is money’ shows time as a thing and money as a universal god that rules the life of everything. In its identity with money, time is presented with a life of its own, as a despotic ruler who sets the pace to a humanity subsumed to a rational and incessant accumulation of abstract wealth and the destruction of life. The violence in the comprehension of

time and space is part of this process.¹² And the image which most precisely portrays this in terms of violence and social destruction is exposed in the well-known Walter Benjamin's *Thesis IX* on the *Angel of History*. Against the idea of progress that represents time and history as a 'chain of events', the Angel of History sees a 'storm' which throws 'debris after debris' to his feet, writes Benjamin (2007: 29).

In any case, what we tried to explain in this section is the topic of the homogeneous and abstract time of the form of value of social relations in capitalism, in terms of antithesis and denial of time understood as an expression of emancipated praxis. This is, that time as an abstract objectivity is the negation of the subject. The revolutions that led to 'real socialism' did not eliminate abstraction as a dominio relation or time as the antithesis of social self-determination.

CLASSIC SOCIALIST REVOLUTION, TIME AND POLITICAL ABSTRACTION

As stated previously, the theoretical novelty of the topic of time and emancipation has a political character and is closely related to the historical failure of the so-called real socialism; this fact brings with itself the questioning of the revolutionary theory which guided those revolutions and states the question of why that concept of revolution failed as a project for emancipation when realized as a political praxis.

A key aspect of this failure, speaking in general terms, is that political abstraction and time as a part of such an abstraction/domination, far from disappearing, were reconfigured in a new power constellation: domination by means of market and law, whose central figure, the laborer as owner and seller of working force and citizen, was replaced by the figure of the state as a place of immediate identity between economics and politics, expressed in the bureaucratic administration of world of work.

In capitalism, real abstraction and objective domination—which is presented as a dominion applied by the object, by things, and not in a direct relation—negate the subject in the mercantile form of social relations, that is, in labor as a dual category subsumed to the dominion of abstract labor. Simultaneously, in the experience of 'real socialism', the subject is denied in the category of labor organized by the socialist state as a vertical totality, and the state unifies economics and politics in a bureaucratic and repres-

sive manner, suppressing in the facts the individual and collective self-determination of laborers.

This process of concentration of power was defined as necessary by the revolutionary avant-garde in a route of human emancipation, being the condition for the rationalization of labor and the development of the productive force of society, which are the keys for building an emancipated society. From this process emerged an identity which asserted the relation state-party-labor as an expression of the abolition of social domination and the realization of the revolutionary subject, but in reality it was the negation of the self-determination of such subject and the assertion of abstraction as a dominio relation in the fettered figures of the state bureaucracy and the party.

In both historical experiences (capitalism and real socialism), alienated praxis is determined by social relations which presuppose abstraction as a social process that separates the subject from the object, and the latter, the object, acquires autonomy in the form of a system or a totality which is the negation of the former, the subject.

In capitalism, the identity of the subject with the object is something similar to a dream of a full and free society which in fact presupposes the tyranny of homogeneity as a dominio category.¹³ It appears as the phantasmagoric result of a material ideology which is settled in the kingdom of commodities. On the other hand, in 'real socialism', the identity appears in the fetishism which accompanies the reversion of the subject into the image of the state machinery which secures labor as an organic totality, that is, a bureaucratic rationalization of the praxis. Both are ways which deny creative and self-determinative activity of the society.

On the other hand, in capitalism, the form of value implies a totality and a systematic totaling of the social relations which occur in an unconscious manner, that is, in the reproduction of the object in itself, and it acquires the form of an autonomous rationality. On the contrary, in the state-centered project of 'real socialism', totality is pursued in a conscious manner, and the state/party is presented as the central subject of this process.¹⁴

Nonetheless, pursuing totality implied the maintenance of a power constellation based on a 'high and a low'—as said in Zapatista language—and the prolongation of a vertical temporality inscribed within the abstract form of the state, that is, within a temporality that was the result of a new way of separation and tearing of the subject from the object—to say in

Adorno's words (1975)—fixed in the state as a form of a dominio relation built on the denial of collective self-determination.

In any case, what is important to highlight is that the denial of social time as an expression of collective self-determination is fundamental to understand the failure of the state-centered emancipation projects, and it is a fact that is in the center of much needed update of the concept of revolution.

THE REINVENTION OF TIME AS A PART OF THE ANTI-CAPITALIST STRUGGLE

Walter Benjamin was the revolutionary thinker who unveiled with great theoretical audacity the profound class secret from the idea of progress and the traps which that *idée-force* supposed for an authentic revolutionary transformation. In his *Theses on the concept of history*,¹⁵ he pointed out that the idea of progress has as a basic structure on a homogeneous, empty time, and that such a time is a dominio relation which through a mystified form is presented in the idea of progress as something neutral. We may say that, in some way, in this criticism Benjamin moves Marx's analysis of time as a part of the form of value of the social relations, to the criticism of the idea progress and the idea universal history that it carries. The mystification which occurs in the form of commodity and the form of value of the social relations is moved to the mystification of universal history in the idea of homogeneous and lineal time.

Against the image of revolution as the 'train engine' of progress, both in the reformist version and in Leninism, Benjamin explains that revolution understood in those terms brings a historical *ruin*.¹⁶ Revolution, on the other hand, must cut the continuum of history and it must not be its realization, since this continuum is the prolongation of the dominio relations, something that leads us to the antagonist images of time of the avant-garde and the avant-gardes at the beginning of the Russian Revolution exposed by Buck-Morss. With the perspective of skipping the historical continuum, Benjamin suggests the idea of a 'now time' as an antithesis of homogenous and empty time. This would be the authentic time of emancipation, the time of human self-determination which skips the historical continuum.

With the idea of revolution as a 'hand brake' of the train engine of progress, Benjamin updates Marx's criticism to capitalism and presents an

alternative image of revolution, against the hegemonic image. If the hegemonic image was linked to the idea of the realization of totality as a part of the historical continuum and progress, the suggestion of a ‘now time’ opens up the possibility to understand the revolutionary change from an untotalling perspective. In other words, class struggle opens time up because the *form of value* of time contains a rebellious time which exists in the ‘mode of being denied’ (Gunn 2005).

Being subsumed by the concept of a homogeneous time with reactionary content as part of the *form of the party* and the *form of the state*, the concept of *denied time* was not sufficiently developed as part of the consciousness of revolutionary change. Maybe this was produced in a more or less spontaneous manner, and it was not necessarily a phenomenon with a clear theoretical consciousness, even though Lenin is already present in relation with the vertical idea of the party as an avant-garde of the labor movement in Rosa Luxemburg’s criticism (1977), just to name one of the most significant ones.

The collapse of the so-called real socialism prepared the land for Benjamin’s suggestions, which were like a bottle floating in the sea, to reach some possible ports related to ‘its time’. (This leads us to think that the relation between revolutionary theory and praxis is neither linear nor immediate and that a marginal idea on social change can have a larger content of truth than the hegemonic idea on it.)

One of these possible ports is the Zapatista experience.

Not because the Benjamin’s abstract idea of ‘now time’ has been put into practice by Zapatista politics as an expression of some unconscious ‘wit’ of history, or because the Zapatistas are some kind of Hegelian incarnation of a universal idea, which is absurd. It is fundamentally because the Zapatistas have had to invent a horizontal time in their anti-capitalist struggle, and that horizontal time implies a criticism of the abstract temporality of the *form of value* and *the form of state*.

In other words, the *port image* to which we refer is that of the struggle in the present, a struggle for the concept of revolution as well. This struggle of zapatismo has opened a threshold from which a link with the past is forged, because the history of the anti-capitalist revolution forces us to think in the point or points in which the victories were transform into failures, that is, where the historical criticism was stopped and allowed an opposite process. In this search, the revolutionary present meets a past which needs to be reclaimed, having into account a theoretical dimension of it.

In this sense, we can see zapatismo as an open window to a revolutionary past. This window allows lights which were apparently off to enter the room of the present struggle. By no means must this image be understood in the sense of Zapatistas being the ‘agents’ of this process, but as a threshold open for them. This threshold is a crevice in the capitalist wall, and it opens the anti-capitalist history into the dialogue of many voices which constitute an inclusive and clearly anti-avantgardist and anti-hegemonic of the ‘high and low’ kind of ‘we’. If revolution has turned into a ruin, the hard duty of zapatismo has been to grow a flower oriented toward another direction and to transform with a lot of effort the dead time of the ruin alive.

Many different works have been written on the Zapatista autonomy, and they highlight general and particular aspects of the experience.¹⁷ One of the most important systematic studies may be the one written by Jérôme Baschet (2015). Some key aspects of the autonomy phenomenon are highlighted, such as territorial organization in the Junta de Buen Gobierno, the characteristics of the autonomous government in the Caracoles, particularly the systematic rotation of the political positions and the party involvement of women, as well as the collective economic characteristics, etcetera. Tension and contradiction also occur, and the way to reach an internal agreement in the process has to do, according to the author, with *replacing work with doing*, in a clear reference to the general thoughts of Holloway (2011) in the matter.

A central aspect of the process is the effort to delete specialized functions in the political positions which could crystallize a hierarchic structure of a ‘high’ over a ‘low’. This implies fundamental changes in the collective and individual subjectivity with the Zapatista Autonomous Educational System playing a strategic role for this. To sum up, the autonomy, which is not only related to local politics, is understood as a making process of horizontal relations tending to delete dominion relations, the ‘high’ and ‘low’ of social relations.

Nevertheless, it is still complicated to summarize in a few words the revolutionary meaning of the Zapatista autonomy as an open process and an unprecedented experience. To conclude, we only need to add the following, rather limited, approximations:

- (a) The politics in Zapatista autonomy imply different temporal and territorial levels and scales (local, national, international, rural and urban), as shown by the most diverse political actions since the

sudden appearance of the EZLN. Those levels and scales manifest a multiform time of the politic dimension of horizontality. One of the most significant initiatives has been the so-called *Otra campaña* inspired in the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle of 2005.

- (b) From a general perspective—not restricted to the local scale of the Committees of Good Government—the autonomy is a kind of anti-capitalist politics aimed to create horizontal time and space, *the “below and to the left” we*, beginning at some kind of ‘mutual recognition’¹⁸ which rejects the *we* as a dominio and hegemonic category coming from the form of state.
- (c) There exists a political entanglement between verticality and horizontality. In no way is it possible to understand the autonomous process as exclusively horizontal. In the Zapatista experience, the vertical dimension occurs fundamentally to permit and detonate an autonomous process with a majority of horizontal characteristics.¹⁹ However, it is a kind of ‘paradoxical strategy’: verticality, far from aspiring to its consolidation, is aimed to its disappearance.
- (d) Collective memory plays a key role in the critical development of their own history, and it goes against the indigenous and communitarian qualities being materialized and mythicized. The strike against the historical *continuum* is also directed to the processes of internal domination. A clear example of this is women’s struggle within the Zapatista communities.²⁰
- (e) The Zapatista autonomy is not a closed category. It may have to be understood as a *process-we* which implies the struggle to transform time into a category for collective and individual self-determination. That is to say, it is not the *we-fixed form* of the alienated time.

To conclude, it could be said in practical terms that, in the Zapatista autonomy, there is a dialectical relation between verticality and horizontality which denies the synthesis as a way of producing a new totality. This is because in the dialectics of the synthesis, verticality succeeds as a form of power. On the contrary, it presents the dialectics to open the world, where the struggle must aim to horizontality as a political axe and time must be an experience of social self-determination, in both its collective and individual expressions. In such an experience, time is presented as a discontinuity and untotaling category. For discontinuity, we understand the moment when the homogenous time of the domino of capital is broken, and “untotaling” category means that criticism of homogeneous time and the totality of the form of value.

AFTERWORD

The classic figure of the Latin American guerrilla fighter can be understood as an image of the coexistence of two souls, of two times: the rebellious time and the vertical time of the organization, which is represented as the seed of a new state, a new historical synthesis.

In relation to this, it can be suggested that in the guerrilla revolutionary experience, there developed a subjectivity linked to the hegemony of that time over the rebellious time.

In a different way, in zapatismo, we can see a history against that history. A classic one is the political manifestation of power dialectics, of revolutionary power understood in classical terms; the other, the Zapatista one, implies the dialectics of emancipation, a dialectics that is not suspended in another form of power while making a fetish of it, but it goes further instead, to the bottom of the criticism of dominio relations.

And that is a process to reinvent time and revolution.

This article was translated by Anahí Prucca.

NOTES

1. This case, and the ones specified in the document, is a personal translation from Spanish into English (*T.N.*).
2. The Cuban case deserves a special consideration which, to some extent, leaves it out of the generalization we just made.
3. Regarding the state as a form of the social relations of capitalism, see Holloway (2002).
4. The centrality of the political organization of the struggles is emphatically explained by Subcomandante Insurgente Moisés. Regarding this, see EZLN (2015).
5. In fact, time as a time of collective self-determination was never a key matter for the revolutionary avant-gardes: the classic model which supposed that the identity of the state with the people gained by the takeover of power would allow a time managed rationally, where the antagonistic contradictions would not continue to be of importance in the social dynamics.
6. In that sense, it can be said that our experience in social change is limited, though there certainly were some moments of splendor. From this comes the idea that the criticism of what already exists must not be restricted by those limits, fetishizing them as if they were the ultimate historical direction, but it must open the horizon of a greater change instead.
7. On the category of form as a fixation of the social flow, see Holloway (2002).

8. Regarding this, see H-Zinn (1999).
9. For a systematic study of the categories of time in Marx's *Capital*, see Tombazos (2014).
10. Regarding this, F. Jameson writes: 'I gloss here a fundamental notion of Adorno's, namely, that what we think of as individuality in the West, and what seems to us somehow to trace the outlines of an essential human nature, is little more than the marks and scars, the violent compressions, resulting from the interiorization by so-called civilized human beings of that instinct for self-preservation without which, in this fallen society or history, we would all be destroyed as surely as those unfortunates who are born without a tactile warning sense of hot and cold, or pain and pleasure, in their secondary nervous systems' (Jameson 2000: 92).
11. When the laborer is forced to sell his work force by the *objective conditions* (possession, dispossession of the production media) of his existence, he is already inscribed within labor as a social totality. The laborer does not sell work but workforce, that is to say, 'living labour' or 'purely subjective existence of labour' (Marx 1971). Objectifying this 'living labour' is already part of labor as an exploitation and dominion category, of labor in its dual character. In such a way that objectified labor is presented as an alienated and opposed to the laborer, as an antithesis between objectified labor and living labor (Marx 1971: 261–262). It is to this to what we refer when we talk about concept of living abstraction.
12. To analyze capitalist accumulation as a compression of time and social spaces, see Harvey (1998).
13. Homogeneity is due to the tearing of the subject and the object (Adorno 1975).
14. Doubtlessly, theoretical exposition of this matter and its defense is found in the brilliant essays of Georg Lukács (1969) *History and class-consciousness*.
15. We based this in Bolivar Echeverría's translation (2007) of Benjamin.
16. We consider that the image of progress as a storm that leaves debris after debris exposed by Benjamin (2007: 29) in the *Thesis IX on the Angel of History* is perfectly applicable to the revolutions of the twentieth century, made in the name of progress. The image of the debris/ruin is fundamental to understand this process and its historical results.
17. Among the publications on autonomy, we can highlight the one coordinated by B. Baronnet, M. Mora Bayo and R. Stahler-Sholk (2011).
18. In Gunn's (2015) argumentation, 'mutual recognition' is Hegel's most radical concept in *Phenomenology of the spirit*, and it implies the dissolution of the relations which imply the denial of the other. This is, in the manner of 'mutual recognition' we can read communism.
19. 'Two decades ago, the EZLN was organization, referent and authority in the indigenous communities. Today it is them who govern us and we are the ones who obey. Before we used to govern and order them, now our job

is to find a way to support their decisions. Before we used to go in front, directing the way and destiny. Today we go at the back of our peoples, sometimes running behind them trying to follow their pace' (Subcomandante insurgente Galeano 2017).

20. On the subject, see the testimonies of Zapatista women in EZLN (2015).

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