

Marx, Real Abstraction, and the Question of Form

I.

The Form of the Commodity

In the first chapter of the first volume of *Capital*, originally published in 1867, Marx summarizes the research question of his ongoing project:

Political economy has indeed 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.¹

The project of the *Critique of Political Economy*, which is also the subtitle of *Capital 1* and its preceding studies,² is thus the question of form. The *categorical* unfolding and presentation of form—the commodity form—is the main challenge of the first chapter of *Capital 1*, which otherwise might be mistaken for a merely linear account of how capitalism and its major social relations came

1 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 173–174. Emphasis added.

2 See Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)* (1857/58), trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1993) and Karl Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), Karl Marx and Frederick Engels Collected Works (MECW), Vol. 29 (New York: International Publishers and Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1987).

historically into being. This mode of presentation cannot rely on the presupposition of an already given content, but needs to develop its historical object through a logical construction of form. The presentation [*Darstellung*] of the constitutive intertwinement of logic and history is central to Marx's critical project.³ Here, form does not designate an ahistorical realm of pure logic; likewise, content is not related to the domain of a given history. This historico-logical intertwinement comes into perspective only by virtue of a critical practice of reading. The question of *how* to theoretically present the value form of the commodity (and particularly the commodity form of labor power) defines the scope and stakes of Marx's entire critical project. As Michael Heinrich rightly comments, "Marx is not predominantly criticizing the conclusions of political economy, but rather the manner in which it *poses questions* [...]"⁴ Changing the questions and research perspective, Marx does not only engage in an immanent critique of previous (classical liberal) theories of political economy; rather, his critique seeks "to break down the *theoretical field* (meaning the self-evident views and spontaneously arising notions) to which the categories of political economy owe their apparent plausibility."⁵ Marx's "epistemological break"⁶ with the categories, research questions, per-

3 A precise account of this intertwinement and its difference from Engels' understanding of "logical-historical method" can be found in Heinz-Dieter Kittsteiner, "'Logisch' und 'historisch'. Über Differenzen des Marxschen und Engelsschen Systems der Wissenschaft," *Internationale Wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* 13 (1977), pp. 1–47.

4 Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx's Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012), p. 34. Emphasis in original.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 35. Emphasis in original.

6 Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 28. Althusser's formulation was aimed at Marx's theoretical development from his early critique of ideology, which still shared Feuerbachian motifs of critique, to his later dialectical materialism after the *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845/46). However, in the sense I use this phrase here it characterizes Marx's entire project of the critique of political economy in relation to its subject matter.

spectives and findings of traditional political economy, ranging from Adam Smith to David Ricardo, defines critique as a practice of transformative reading that changes the criticized content on the level of the constitution of its scientific objects. In other words, the object and subject matter of the critique of political economy is not simply “out there,” but has to be produced by way of a critical method. By exposing the epistemic blind spots of the criticized theoretical field, Marx presents his own dialectical method and constitutes the scientific objects of his inquiry. But what, then, is the *subject matter* of the critique of political economy, if it is not only an immanent critique of given classical liberal theories of political economy? If the object of the critique of political economy is not given without its form, how can we construct this form and what could be a knowledge of this form? As we shall see, in the case of Marx form is *not* an intellectual product of the mind that could be opposed to empirical objects. The ontological status of form escapes epistemologies and ontologies, which operate by way of non-dialectical, binary doublets like appearance vs. essence, or imagination vs. existence.

Already the first sentence of *Capital 1* contains the central problem and challenge of Marx’s critical project: “The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears [*erscheint*] as an ‘immense collection of commodities’; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form [*Elementarform*].”⁷ How, then, are we to discriminate between the levels of appearance [*Erscheinung*] and essence [*Wesen*] without relegating Marx’s critical project to a binary logic? What is the categorical and historical genesis of the commodity’s essence and why can it only appear in this form? In fact, as Hans-Georg Backhaus put it, “[t]he

7 Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 125; compare Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, Erster Band, Marx-Engels-Werke (MEW), Vol. 23 (Berlin: Dietz, 1962), p. 49.

dialectical method cannot be restricted to leading the form of appearance back to the essence; it must show in addition why the essence assumes precisely this or that form of appearance."⁸ The commodity as an abstract yet real category of societies in which the "capitalist mode of production prevails" appears, at first sight, as "an extremely obvious, trivial thing."⁹ However, as Marx is quick to tell his readers:

Its analysis brings out that it [the commodity] is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a use-value, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it satisfies human needs; or that it first takes on these properties as the product of human labour. [...]. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a sensuous supra-sensuous thing [*sinnlich übersinnliches Ding*].¹⁰

As a "sensuous supra-sensuous thing" the commodity assumes two contradictory characters: in the *sensuous* world, it appears as one thing among other things; at the same time, however, it has acquired *supra-sensuous*, metaphysical or even theological properties. These real yet supra-sensuous or non-empirical properties cannot appear as such: they pertain to the specific *social form* through which the commodity appears. Commodities acquire the capacity of being exchangeable due to "essential" value relations that only "appear" with these commodities in their mutual exchange relations. This mode of appearance does not pose a merely epistemological problem, but relates to the split character of

8 Hans-Georg Backhaus, "On the Dialectics of the Value-Form," *Thesis Eleven* 1 (1980): p. 102.

9 Marx, *Capital* 1, pp. 125 and 163.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 163; translation changed, compare Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*. Erster Band, p. 85.

capitalist reality and the ontological status of its ruling social form, the commodity form.

Unpacking the intricacies of the value dimension of commodities, Marx, in the first edition of *Capital* 1 in 1867, provided his readers with an intriguing image:

It is as if alongside and external to lions, tigers, rabbits, and all other actual animals, which form when grouped together the various kinds, species, subspecies, families etc. of the animal kingdom, there existed also in addition *the animal*, the individual incarnation of the entire animal kingdom.¹¹

The problem of the value form of the commodity cannot be explained on the level of empiricist economy only, which simply counts and accounts for concrete “animals.” The value of a commodity is expressed in money and as money the commodity redoubles itself into two seemingly independent existences: as a specific commodity (or, as in Marx’s image, as “lions, tigers, rabbits” etc.) the commodity exists in the sensuous world; however, as value, expressed in money (or, as in Marx’s image, as “the animal”), it also exists in a non- or supra-sensuous way along with and in addition to its sensuous mode of existence. The problem of form and the stakes of critique, hence, can be summarized as the challenge of presenting the mode of existence of these two dimensions of the commodity and the dialectical, that is, “sensuous supra-sensuous” *unity* of the commodity form. As we shall see, it would be too simple and utterly wrong to assume that one dimension of the commodity is concrete and really existing (as sensuous content), while the other is abstract and conceptual (as supra-sensuous

11 Karl Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie . Erster Band*, Hamburg 1867, in *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA), ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim ZK der KPdSU und der SED, vol. II.5.1 (Berlin: Dietz, 1983), p. 37. Translation by Sami Khatib. Emphasis in original.

form). To complicate matters further, neither dimension is derived from the other in a deductive or inductive manner. How, then, to present the commodity form?

Marx's well-known entry point is the split or dual nature of the commodity: use-value and exchange-value.¹² Whereas the former seems unproblematic as long as it refers to an empirical thing, satisfying a determinate human need, exchange-value expresses an abstract social category: economic value. Exchange value is the form of appearance of value: it designates the merely quantitative value-relation of one commodity vis-à-vis another commodity as relational difference. From the presentation of the dual nature of the commodity Marx moves on to the next categorical level of redoubling. The labor that produces a commodity also has two sides: concrete and abstract labor. While use values are produced by concrete labor, measured by concrete labor time (chronometric time),¹³ the very act of concrete production also produces value. Value is produced by "abstract human labour,"¹⁴ which exceeds linear chronometric measurement. However, in real time, these two acts of production are the same: abstract labor or value designates a social relation between different expenditures of labor power materialized in the results of this expenditure. Put differently, the concrete use value dimension of labor does not come into being independently from its abstract value-producing dimension. However, on the market they appear as two independent (if not antagonistic) entities, endowed with a life of their own: the commodity exists as a commodity-thing and as money. (Here we recall Marx's earlier image: it is as if "tigers, rabbits, and all other actual animals" exist along with "the animal.")

¹² Marx, *Capital* 1, pp. 125–131.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

As has been mentioned by numerous Marx scholars,¹⁵ Marx's distinction of concrete and abstract labor is ambiguous and invites misreadings. Marx defines abstract labor also as the expenditure of human labor power as such, instead of focusing solely on the fact that abstract labor expresses the totalizing exchange relation (mediated through and by money) of *all* expenditures of concrete labor in a given capitalist society, which is ultimately the world market. There are passages in *Capital* 1 where Marx seems to define abstract labor as "an expenditure of human labour power, in the physiological sense,"¹⁶ as "essentially the expenditure of human brain, nerves, muscles and sense organs."¹⁷ Against these formulations we are to insist on the purely social and differential-relational nature of value and its "substance,"¹⁸ that is, abstract labor. For Marx, substance is not an empirical essence (in the sense of natural or physiological substratum) but a purely social relation, constantly moving and transforming itself. Marx couldn't be clearer when he writes:

Not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities [*Wertgegenständlichkeit*] as values; in this it is the direct opposite of the coarsely sensuous objectivity of commodities as physical objects. We may twist and turn a single commodity as we wish; it remains impossible to grasp it as a thing possessing value. However, let us remember that commodities possess an objective character as values only in so far as they are all expressions of an identical social substance, human labour, that their objective character as values is therefore purely social. From this it follows

15 For example Michael Heinrich, Hans-Georg Backhaus, Moishe Postone, to name only a few.

16 Marx, *Capital* 1, p. 137

17 *Ibid.*, p. 164.

18 Marx, *Capital* 1, p. 128.

self-evidently that it can only appear in the social relation between commodity and commodity.¹⁹

If value and its substance, abstract human labor, can only appear in a relation between things—between commodity and commodity—we have a further clue to the problem of presenting this *mode of appearance* in a merely empirical manner as it appears in concrete reality. Following such an empiricist approach, we would have always already missed the point as to why a specific appearance appears in *this* way: why *this* content (commodities, prices, exchange relations etc.) assumes *this* form.

II.

From Abstraction to Concretion

In the first chapter of *Capital 1*, Marx develops the problem of the value form of the commodity through a presentation of *abstract* yet *real* social relations. That is to say, in capitalism, *real* social relations are constituted in an *abstract* manner: abstract exchange relations between concrete commodities and concrete commodity owners weave a totalizing net of *really* existing asymmetric social relations. In other words, in capitalism relations between humans are social only in this sense: they pertain to a world of abstract exchange relations between commodities; they cannot be developed and analyzed from their inherent “thingly” properties. For instance, the social relation of workers to their colleagues or superiors is not defined by the material properties of their

19 Ibid., pp. 138–139. I have commented on Marx’s oxymoronic German compound noun “Wertgegenständlichkeit” (literally: value-objectivity) in Sami Khatib, “‘Sensuous Supra-Sensuous’: The Aesthetics of Real Abstraction,” in *Aesthetic Marx*, ed. Samir Gandesha and Johan F. Hartle (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 49–72, especially pp. 56–58.

tasks, performances, mental or emotional affinities or the nature of their activities. Social relations are mediated objectively—through and by objects in their abstract commodified relation as bearers of value. Commodities are things in their capacity as bearers and expressions of value. And the value of each commodity is the form of its social existence. However, this form does not present itself as such: value only appears *après coup* on the market as a relation between things after things-as-commodities have already acquired a price for which they can be bought. This is why Marx does not begin with the world of appearances, concretely existing things, agents on the market, persons and activities which can be seen, perceived or otherwise sensuously intuited. The method of “ascending” from the base level of abstract social relations to the concrete, “grown-together” (*con-crescere*) level of experienced social reality is outlined in Marx’s earlier draft *Grundrisse* (1857/58), in which he lays bare his own dialectical-materialist departure from Hegelian dialectics.

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 representation [*Vorstellung*] of the whole, and I would then, by means of further determination, move analytically towards ever more simple concepts [*Begriffe*], 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 [*aufstiegen*] 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.²⁰

In this dense passage Marx engages with the method of classical political economy, criticizing its empiricist commonsense approach. In Marx's view, we are precisely *not* to begin with the sensuously given world as it appears to us at first glance. This anti-intuitive move is based on Hegel's refutation of "abstract thinking."²¹ By beginning our analysis with the given reality, knowingly or not, we include untheorized abstractions already present in the concepts we apply to reality in the first place: the rich totality of the concrete world, i.e. the population, is itself an abstraction. What has been abstracted from disappears in the epistemic blind spot of such an approach. Instead of examining those

20 Marx, *Grundrisse (Rough Draft)*, pp. 100–101. I have changed the existing translation; compare Karl Marx, "Einleitung [zu den 'Grundrissen der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie']," *Marx-Engels-Werke* (MEW), Vol. 42 (Berlin: Dietz, 1983), pp. 34–35.

21 Compare Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, "Wer denkt abstrakt?," in *Jenaer Schriften*, Werke, Vol. 2, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), pp. 575–581.

abstractions already present and “at work” in the given concrete reality, we only ascend to ever thinner and less significant abstractions by way of analyzing, dissecting, breaking down. Such an approach can never come to terms with the real abstractions *present in reality*, for it can grasp abstraction only as a conceptual operation generated by the intellect. In strictly nominalist fashion, the really existing abstraction of the commodity form would remain a conceptual abstraction existing in the scholarly world of theory only. Marx’s critical method, however, does not simply opt for the realist flipside of classical political economy’s positivist nominalism but shifts the entire epistemic field in which these notions are rooted.

Let us consider the dense passage where Marx explains his “scientifically correct method” as ascending from the base level of simple abstract determinations and categories to the synthetic totality of concrete (“grown-together”) reality:

The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration [*Zusammenfassung*, literally: gathering together] of many determinations, hence unity of the manifold [*Einheit des Mannigfaltigen*]. It appears [*erscheint*] in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration [*Zusammenfassung*], 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 intuition [*Anschauung*] and representation [*Vorstellung*]. Along the first path the full representation was evaporated to yield an abstract determination; along the second, the abstract determinations lead towards a reproduction of the concrete by way of thought. In this way Hegel fell into the illusion of conceiving the real as the product of thought concentrating itself, probing its own depths, and unfolding itself out of itself, by itself, whereas the method of ascending from the abstract to the concrete is only the way in which thought appropriates the concrete, reproduces it as the concrete in the mind.

But this is by no means the process by which the concrete itself comes into being. For example, the simplest economic category, say e.g. exchange value, presupposes population, moreover a population producing in specific relations; as well as a certain kind of family, or commune, or state, etc. It can never exist other than as an abstract, one-sided relation within an already given, concrete, living whole. As a category, by contrast, exchange value leads an antediluvian existence. Therefore, to the kind of consciousness—and this is characteristic of the philosophical consciousness—for which conceptual thinking is the real human being, and for which the conceptual world as such is thus the only reality, the movement of the categories appears as the real act of production—which only, unfortunately, receives a jolt from the outside—whose product is the world; and—but this is again a tautology—this is correct in so far as the concrete totality is a totality of thoughts, concrete in thought, in fact a product of thinking and comprehending; but not in any way a product of the concept [*Begriff*] which thinks and generates itself outside or above intuition [*Anschauung*] and representation [*Vorstellung*]; a product, rather, of the working-up of intuition [*Anschauung*] and representation by concepts [*Vorstellung in Begriffe*]. The totality as it appears in the head, as a totality of thoughts, is a product of a thinking head, which appropriates the world in the only way it can, a way different from the artistic, religious, practical and mental appropriation of this world. The real subject retains its autonomous existence outside the head just as before; namely as long as the head's conduct is merely speculative, merely theoretical. Hence, in the theoretical method, too, the subject, society, must always be kept in mind as the presupposition.²²

22 Marx, *Grundrisse (Rough Draft)*, pp. 101–102. I have changed the existing translation; compare Marx, “Einleitung [zu den ‘Grundrissen der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie’],” pp. 35–36.

Marx seems to position himself here between a materialist Kant and an idealist Hegel: the appropriation of the real world by way of intuition and conceptual representation does not bring the world into being, does not cause its existence. A realist reading of Hegel, for which thinking and reality, concept and world, are ultimately the same, is ruled out. However, reality is not simply given outside the cognizing mind; abstractions already exist in the actual world in the form of social relations. Marx's dialectical materialism thus tries to salvage Hegel's critique of abstract thinking. While Hegel's dialectical mode of presentation remains valid as a method of the intellectual reproduction of the concrete world by means of intuition and (abstract) conceptual representation, this reproduction in theory is not the production of the concrete world itself. Unlike its appearance in the absolute idealism of the Hegelian mode, being is not ultimately thinking and vice versa. Of course, for Marx too the mediations and transformations of being and consciousness are dialectical; yet conceptual mediation is never a predicate of existence. Against the dual background of Kant and Hegel, Marx's dialectical materialism performs a kind of "original reproduction" of the concrete world, since his critical method does not succumb to the dualist empiricist, vulgar-materialist or neo-Kantian worldview of two unmediated worlds: the one external being "out there," the other internal "in the mind" (and, hence, compelled to simply copy, reflect, reproduce the former). Such a flat theory of reflection would remain within the worldview of unmediated categories of the mind and an independent uncritical world outside. Marx's point is that being and consciousness are *inherently* mediated; hence, his dialectical materialist method investigates the social forms, characters and embodiments this inherent mediation assumes.

For our problem of coming to terms with the real abstract nature of the commodity form a central insight can be extracted from the above-quoted passage from

the *Grundrisse*. If the concrete is concrete because it is the “gathering together” [*Zusammenfassung*] of many determinations, hence unity of the manifold, we can conclude that this concrete is real in a specific sense: concrete reality is “glued” or “sewn” together out of abstract determinations already present and at work in reality. However, the materiality of these abstract determinations is not empirical sensuous like the sensuous concrete reality. Rather, they are “made” out of a supra-sensuous materiality that Marx defined as the abstract social relations addressed in the dimension of value. Value, as we know by now, only appears in the relation between commodities. It is the essence of value to appear in these objective commodity relations. Again, Marx does not invite us to read his critical method as a mapping of two different worlds: here the concrete world of sensuous appearance, there the non-sensuous world of abstract determinations (which theory would then seek to “unveil”). On the contrary, the commodity as existing presents the unity of both: a sensuous supra-sensuous thing. Form here means the differential disparity of appearance and essence without making a dualist claim on two worlds existing in parallel. We understand now why Marx in his earlier formulation from the first edition of *Capital* 1 carefully writes that the dimension of value (“the animal”), materialized in money, exists among and in addition to the commodities (“lions, tigers, rabbits” etc.) in a specific way: it is only *as if* this animal existed in such a real way. However, this as-if mode of existence is not an illusion.

The concrete world of capitalist appearances (commodities, workers, capitalists, population, classes etc.) designates a totalizing ensemble of social relations which is made out of abstractions, abstract determinations that really exist in a peculiar sensuous supra-sensuous manner. In order to grasp them we are to begin with abstract determinations in order to ascend [*aufsteigen*] to the concrete world as concentration, gathering-together of the

manifold of capitalist relations of production. Marx's vertical topology of ascending from abstract base-level to concrete appearance-level provides us with a first clue about capitalist ontology: the abstract base-level of really existing abstractions exists *in the same world* as its mode of appearance. The surface of concrete reality is made of really existing abstractions. This concrete surface of commodity relations, however, is not accidental but essential in the precise sense of presenting an ensemble of "grown-together" abstract relations. In fact, the essence of essence is to appear, there is no epistemological problem here: the essence of the commodity form (real abstractions) appears as an "immense collection of commodities"; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form."²³ The famous "secret"²⁴ of commodity fetishism only arises from the redoubling of the abstract base-level: it appears twice, as value-properties of sensuously existing commodities in their mutual relations and as money. These two modes of appearance act and function *as if* they existed next to each other in the same world. Again, there is no illusion involved here. The epistemological problem only emerges once I take the sensuously appearing commodity as the only really existing objectivity and treat its redoubling value-objectivity as merely derived, intellectually abstracted, secondary, illusionary, etc.

III.

Real Abstraction, or the Unconscious of the Commodity Form

Having established Marx's method, its departure from Hegel's dialectics and its critical distance and proxim-

²³ Marx, *Capital* 1, p. 125.

²⁴ See Marx's subchapter "The Fetishism of the commodity and its secret," *ibid.*, pp. 163–173.

ity to a Kantian materialism, we can now flip over the vertical topology implied in the metaphor of “ascending” from simple, abstract determinations to the level of concrete reality. Following a horizontal topology, we can grasp the base level of abstract determinations as actually existing along with concrete reality. Earlier we said Marx was rightly cautious about not ascribing to the dimension of value (“the animal”) a full existence of its own. However, now we can add a second complication to this peculiar as-if existence of the dimension of value, which brings our close reading back to the ontological and epistemological status of form in Marx.

The problem of form arises at the intersection of the historical genesis and logical validity of capitalist relations of production. Form thus does not designate a stable entity, bound to ahistorical logics or purely transcendental forms. “For Marx,” as Alfred Sohn-Rethel reminds us, “form is time-bound. It originates, dies and changes within time.”²⁵ Without going into the details of Sohn-Rethel’s otherwise problematic reading of Marx with Kant and against Hegel, we can draw a crucial insight here: For Marx’s dialectical materialism, form does not only change within time; time as form (i.e. as the form of spatial measurement) is also a historically produced form. Marx “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.”²⁶ The interaction of the level of the “time of natural and human history” and the level of time as a historically-produced and changing form renders it impossible to give a linear account of how capitalism, its forms and categories came “once upon a time” into being.

²⁵ Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour* (London: Macmillan, 1978), p. 17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

If form is time-bound and, in this sense, also the historical expression of the social production of time-as-form, we can think of form as a changing social relation, which contains its own unhistoricizable historicity while producing historical time. This peculiar historicity is unhistoricizable because the standard of historicization (time as chronometric measurement, diachronic sequentiality etc.) is itself produced by and through it. Assuming an unhistoricizable historicity of socially valid forms does not imply their eternalization. However, this historicity cannot be told either in a linear way. So, what then is the epistemological and ontological status of an unhistoricizable historicity? If this unhistoricizable historicity is not simply something untold, forgotten or unaccounted for (which could be accounted for, at least in theory) but *repressed* in a structural sense, it always escapes the presentation of its historical (diachronic) genesis.

It is the wager of this reading of Marx and Sohn-Rethel that the peculiar historicity of the commodity form is *structurally repressed and real*; it does spring from the intellectual realm of syllogisms or Kantian antinomies of pure reason. Apparently, neither the discourse of political economy nor the one of philosophical epistemology can provide us here with a model. However, if we change the discursive terrain and turn to a different field of knowledge, we may find a structure of argument that could elucidate the logical temporality at work here. In Freudian psychoanalysis the ontological status of *Urverdrängung*, primal or originary repression, is precisely this: an “event” that is real but exists only in its status as repressed. Originary repression is real only insofar as it has real effects (it exists in its effects only); yet it comes “before” that which is being repressed. Put differently, it cannot be told or made conscious because the prefix *Ur-* or originary (primal) indicates the quasi-transcendental status of primariness—a primariness that comes logically *before* anything historical can be

repressed. Freud insists that “repression is not a defensive mechanism which is present from the very beginning, and that it cannot arise until a sharp cleavage [*Sonderung*] has occurred between conscious and unconscious mental activity—that *the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious.*”²⁷ In other words, ordinary repression is unconscious in a different way than particular repressed mental states, which could be symbolized in the process of the psychoanalytical cure and whose returning/recurring symptoms can be made conscious.

Repression already presupposes the unconscious, and its function does not consist so much in suppressing, inhibiting or hindering satisfaction but in keeping the drive away from consciousness. The paradox of repression lies in the fact that repression is secondary, despite being constitutive of the repressed. It can only emerge after the scission of the mental apparatus between consciousness and

- 27 Sigmund Freud, “Repression,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, Vol. 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 147. Emphasis in original. Compare Sigmund Freud, “Die Verdrängung,” *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 10 (London: Imago, 1946), p. 249. For a detailed discussion of this passage in Freud, the temporality and ontological status of *Urverdrängung*, see Samo Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious* (London: Verso, 2015), pp. 130–148. Tomšič’s convincing argument places the homology of the discourses of Freud and Marx at the epistemo-ontological status of “Ur-” or “ursprünglich” (primal, originary). The Marxian counterpart to *Urverdrängung* is, of course, *ursprüngliche Akkumulation*, “primitive accumulation”—an “event” that cannot be historicized since it has to be restaged and repeated always anew to keep capitalist relations of production in power. As I have argued elsewhere, so-called primitive accumulation—the disruptive transformation from feudal to capitalist society, the violent separation of labor power from the means of production by way of expropriation, expulsion, enclosures and brutal force—is the repressed origin and primal scene of the capitalist world market without which the valorization of abstract labor as surplus value is not possible. In other words, the entire project of the critique of political economy is at stake when we try to theorize the historical and logical origin of capitalism’s major social form and mode of production. See Sami Khatib, “No Future: The Space of Capital and the Time of Dying,” in *Former West: Art and the Contemporary after 1989*, eds. Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2017), pp. 639–652, especially pp. 641–643.

the unconscious has been established, but it is also the necessary condition for this cleavage.²⁸

If we distinguish between “constitutive repression” [*Urverdrängung*] (i.e. constitutive of repression) and “constituted repression” (i.e. repressed content and its mode of returning in the form of symptoms, which can be subject to the psychoanalytic cure),²⁹ we have found a homological model to come to terms with the ontological status of an unhistoricizable historicity, which is both secondary to and constitutive of the history of the commodity form, i.e. the historical formation of capitalist relations of production. The unhistoricizable historicity of the commodity form can only emerge once we are already in capitalism; yet its ontological status of assuming an unhistoricizable historicity structurally conditions the split in capitalist reality that Marx theorized in terms of the dual character of the commodity, the dual character of labor, and the redoubling of the commodity as commodity (“animals”) and money (“*the animal*”).

Speaking of an unhistoricizable historicity of the commodity form is nothing else than taking a real yet unconscious historicity of capitalist history into account, which has, in the “first place,” produced these socially valid forms. In other words, we can allow for the possibility of forms that are not generated by the conscious mind of conceptual thought. Instead, we are pointing to forms that exist in an abstract manner—forms that are not reducible to any empirical historical subject and his or her intellectual faculties, and the ontogenetic and phylogenetic history of these faculties. Accounting for an unaccountable, that is, unhistoricizable historicity of socially valid forms (i.e. the commodity form), we could

²⁸ Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, p. 138.

²⁹ I take the instructive differentiation of “constitutive and constituted repression” from Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, pp. 133–140.

speak of an unconscious of form, or, to be more precise, of the problem of the “unconscious of the commodity form”³⁰ as distinct from the unconscious content of capitalist history, i.e. repressed events of counter-hegemonic struggles.³¹ The unconscious of the commodity form would then be another term for “constitutive repression,” whereas repressed events of history could be read as “constituted repression.”

With the notion of constitutive repression and the unconscious of the commodity form we finally arrive at the ontological status of the real-abstract character of the value form of the commodity as distinct from thought abstractions. “While the abstractions of natural science are thought abstractions, the economic concept of value is a real one. It exists nowhere other than in the human mind but it does not spring from it.”³² As paradoxical as this seems at first sight, the commodity form assumes the form of thought, exists in thought, yet does not originate or spring from thought. Sohn-Rethel’s characterization of the value form of the commodity gives us a possible definition of what the unconscious of the commodity form could be.

Value, that is, a denaturalized, literally abstracted (*abstrahere*) social relation, comes into being by virtue of a *real* process of exchange—an actually performed equation of things as commodities, which acquires at the same time the form of *thought*, that is, abstraction. “Wherever commodity exchange takes place, it does so in effective ‘abstraction’ from use. This is an abstrac-

30 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 9–16.

31 Those negative or unconscious events of history are addressed for instance in Walter Benjamin’s notion of the “tradition of the oppressed.” See Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938–1940*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 392.

32 Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, p. 20.

tion not in mind but in fact."³³ Value can only appear in accordance with the conscious form of thought, i.e. intellectual abstraction; however, its "dark," unaccountable, unhistoricizable historicity points to a really performed abstraction outside of the conscious mind, which only retroactively conforms to the forms of the mind. From a linear historical perspective, this argument is easily to grasp since "[b]efore thought could arrive at pure *abstraction*, the abstraction was already at work in the social effectivity of the market."³⁴ The critical kernel of Sohn-Rethel's argument, however, goes beyond a disputable analysis of the historical genesis of abstract thought out of the first socially-valid coinage system and exchange economy, dating back to Ancient Greece and the Phoenicians. With Sohn-Rethel's reading of Marx, we are to ask what is the status of that form of thought "*whose ontological status is not that of thought.*"³⁵ In the case of abstract labor, we can conclude that it has the form of thought but it owes its existence to an unconscious mode of social interaction, which becomes conscious only at a different site, namely, in the mind as intellectual abstraction.

In his reading of Marx, Freud and Sohn-Rethel, Slavoj Žižek thus proposes to take the formula "*the form of thought whose ontological status is not that of thought*" as one of the possible definitions of the unconscious.³⁶ In this way, real abstraction becomes the unconscious operator and mediator of the form of abstract thought logically prior to abstract thought-content. As a quasi-transcendental (and seemingly time-less, ahistorical) form of thought, real abstraction necessarily remains unconscious; it cannot acquire a conscious history without losing its quasi-transcendental status as originary repressed. In other words, the ontological status

33 Ibid., p. 25.

34 Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 10.

35 Ibid., p. 13. Emphasis in original.

36 Ibid.

of the real abstraction performed by commodity relations remains unconscious in a radical way: it points to the unconscious of the commodity form—to an unconscious form, which only appears in the mind as necessarily timeless and ahistorical, i.e. as the Kantian transcendental forms of pure thinking (quantity, quality, relation and modality) and pure intuition (time and space).³⁷ Of course, we cannot deny the fact that the concept of abstract labor, which stands in the center of Marx's presentation of the commodity form, conforms to the (logical and aesthetic) forms of the Kantian transcendental subject; however, this epistemological status of conformity does not tell us anything about its ontological status and the question of how abstract labor came into being.

With Marx, we can conclude that form in its radical sense as *changing in and with time* remains unconscious and constitutively repressed. Otherwise, the commodity form would relapse either to a historical form without epistemological consequences or to a purely ahistorical concept without historical determinations. Grasping real abstraction as the unconscious of the commodity form makes us understand that form is never reducible to conscious abstractions of the intellect only. If the commodity is a sensuous supra-sensuous thing, we can conclude that the commodity is the sensuously perceptible and intellectually conceivable object that owes its existence to an unconscious (supra- or, rather, *infra*-sensuous) dimension.

If the commodity form and its unconscious kernel, that is, real abstraction, contain an unaccountable, unhistoricizable historicity, whose ontological status and logical temporality can be understood as homologous to originary repression (constitutive repression)

37 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B 36 and B 106.

in Freudian psychoanalysis, we can eventually ask the question about the constituted repression enacted and displaced by capitalist relations of production. The dimension of value and abstract labor symptomatically points to and, at the same time, occludes the repressed history of an unconscious subject. Labor power is the unconscious subject of value that keeps on bringing the commodity form into being. For the later Marx of *Capital*, this subject is not stable or always already existing, but produced as the bearer of labor power, that is, the proletariat. Whereas the commodity form is real-abstract and general, the proletariat is really universal and singular. “The proletariat is a particular type of the universal, a singular universal, which stands opposite to the abstract and false universalism of the general equivalent and the commodity form.”³⁸ This opposition is asymmetric in the sense of the asymmetry implied in the exchange relation of the value of the commodity of labor power (wage) and the value produced by the application of labor power in the production process (surplus value, i.e. capital).³⁹

The history of the proletariat is class struggle—yet this history is repressed. The repressed history of class struggle pertains to an ongoing history of constituted repression; it can only be “cured” in the labor of “working-through” the conditions of its repression, i.e. by symbolizing and displacing class antagonism in a series of revolutions and revolutionary defeats. Such struggles for revolutionary “cure,” however, do not necessarily

38 Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, p. 193.

39 The value of the commodity of labor power, as Marx defined it, finds its standard in the costs of its reproduction and, hence, also in unpaid reproductive labor. What appears as surplus value on the side of the capitalist (who employs labor power) appears as loss of living labor on the side of the owner and seller of labor power, historically the wage laborer. Surplus value thus implies the extraction of surplus labor time. However, while being equated, time and value are not equal but express a systemic asymmetry. See Marx, *Capital* 1, pp. 247–257 and 270–280.

abolish the level of constitutive repression enacted by and through the commodity form. Ultimately, we arrive at a seemingly circular conclusion: the unhistoricizable historicity of the commodity form structurally conditions and represses the negative history of an unconscious subject (the proletariat) without which the commodity form could have never come into being “in the first place.” However, this seemingly circular conclusion is itself the effect of the primal separation, the originary cleavage of an unconscious historicity and a conscious history. It is the ontological inconsistency of this cleavage that is addressed in Marx’s concept of the commodity form.

Sami Khatib

Marx, Real Abstraction, and the Question of Form

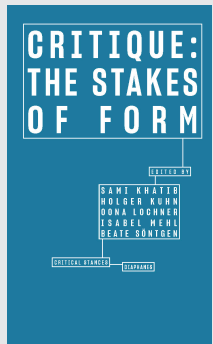
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Summary

Critique is a form of thinking and acting. It is determined by its objects, yet never accesses them immediately but is always mediated through its own forms of (re)presentation. Since the end of the 18th century, there has been a dynamization and fluidization of the understanding of form, as topoi such as the break, the marginalization, the tearing and opening indicate. However, these multifarious attempts to “build on the structure through demolition” (Benjamin) testify to the dependence of all articulation on the forms of (re)presentation [“Darstellung”]. As a philosophical problem, the question of form arises in critical theory from Marx to Adorno. Since the 1960s, literary practices have proliferated which generate their critical statements less argumentatively than through the programmatic use of formal means. At the same time, the writing self, along with its attitudes, reflections, affects and instruments, visibly enters the critical scene—whereas the theatrical scene as a stage of critique has been contested intensively during the 20th century. This volume examines how the interdependence of critique, object, and form translates into critical stances, understood as learnable, reproducible gestures, which bear witness to changing conditions and media of critical practice.

With contributions by Maria Fusco, Eva Geulen, Thomas Glaser, Birgit M. Kaiser, Sami Khatib, Sebastian Kirsch, Chris Kraus, Holger Kuhn, Oona Lochner, Isabel Mehl, Bettine Menke, Beate Söntgen, Heiko Stubenrauch, Kathrin Thiele, Lynne Tillman, Masha Tupitsyn, Mimmi Woisnitza



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