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# The Open Secret of Real Abstraction

**Alberto Toscano**

*This article revisits the Marxist debate on 'real abstraction' in order to evaluate the relevance of this concept to a period marked by the rise of cognitive capitalism and a proliferation of discourses on abstraction in social theory. The article touches on the interpretive debates around Marx's 1857 Introduction and tries to identify the tensions and contradictions at work in the distinctive contributions of Louis Althusser, Alfred Sohn-Rethel, and Roberto Finelli to thinking on the specific status of abstraction, in terms of both the methodology of Marxism and the logic and ontology of capitalism. These foundational debates are then contrasted with attempts by Paolo Virno and Lorenzo Cillario to think the contemporary figures of abstraction in terms of its politicization, on the one hand, and its operational role in the labor process, on the other.*

**Key Words:** Abstraction, Cognitive Capitalism, Commodity Exchange, Intellect, Ontology

As a rule, the most general abstractions arise only in the midst of the richest possible concrete development, where one thing appears as common to many, to all.

Individuals are now ruled by *abstractions*, whereas earlier they depended on one another.

—Marx, *Grundrisse*

Whether we are concerned with the unmasking of commodity fetishism, the formalization of surplus value, or the discourse on alienation, it is difficult to ignore that much of the force of the Marxian matrix—when compared to contemporary discourses of abstraction with their frequent reliance on notions of complexity and information—is based on its depiction of capitalism as the culture of abstraction *par excellence*, as a society that, *pace* many of the more humanist denunciations of the dominant ideology, is really driven, in many respects, by abstract entities, traversed by powers of abstraction (Toscano 2008). A particular modality of social abstraction can thus be identified as the *differentia specifica* of capitalism vis-à-vis other modes of production. As the Italian Marxist phenomenologist Enzo Paci wrote, “The fundamental character of capitalism . . . is revealed in the tendency to make abstract categories live as though they were concrete. Categories become subjects, or rather,

even persons, though we must here speak of *person* in the Latin sense, that is, of masks ... 'Capitalist' means a man transformed into a mask, into the *person* of capital: in him acts capital producing capital ... The abstract, in capitalist society, *functions concretely*" (1979, 160–1, 153).

The debate around the Marxian uses of abstraction often orbits around one of the few explicit methodological prescriptions bequeathed by the author of *Capital*, the 1857 Introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx 1970). Specifically, it centers around the interpretation of a passage on the dialectics of the abstract and the concrete (Ilyenkov 1982), whose core is as follows.

The seventeenth-century economists, for example, always took as their starting point the living organism, the population, the nation, the State, several States, etc., but analysis led them always in the end to the discovery of a few decisive abstract, general relations, such as division of labor, money, and value. When these separate factors were more or less clearly deduced and established, economic systems were evolved which from simple concepts, such as labor, division of labor, demand, exchange-value, advanced to categories like State, international exchange and world market. The latter is obviously the correct scientific method. The concrete concept is concrete because it is a synthesis of many definitions, thus representing the unity of diverse aspects. It appears therefore in reasoning as a summing-up, a result, and not as the starting point, although it is the real point of origin, and thus also the point of origin of perception and imagination. (Marx 1970, 206)

The first point to note is that Marx promotes in these pages a theoretical break with an empiricist or neopositivist usage of the terms 'abstract' and 'concrete'. He underscores a distinction between sensibility, perception, and sense data, on the one hand, and speculative form or theoretical concept, on the other (Bensussan 1999, 4–7; for a dissenting evaluation, see Echeverría 1989). Or rather, Marx reformulates the distinction such that the sensible and the empirical appear as a final *achievement* rather than a presupposition-less starting point (Virno 2001). As I shall suggest, the Marxian stance on abstraction, as intimated in the 1857 Introduction, cannot easily be mapped onto customary distinctions between empiricism and rationalism or even materialism and idealism. This is evident, too, in the 'twisted' genesis of Marx's concept of abstraction, which can be seen to begin with a Feuerbachian critique of Hegel, moving through a Hegelian surpassing of Feuerbach, and finally resulting in a political and philosophical overcoming of the very terms of Hegel's *logic* of abstraction.

To the extent that Marx produces a methodological conception of abstraction that is diagonal to Feuerbachian sensualism and Hegelian logicism, different authors have concurred in seeing the 1857 Introduction as a break with a generic, humanist, or anthropological concept of abstraction: the passage to a notion of *real abstraction*—abstraction not as a mere mask, fantasy, or diversion, but as a force operative in the world (Finelli 1987; Rancière 1989). Thus, Roberto Finelli writes of a 'generic' abstraction that, prior to 1857, Marx inherited from Feuerbach. This generic abstraction *presupposes* the genus 'humanity' and regards all political, religious, and economic abstractions (the State, God, and private property) as fictitious

hypostases of a positive, underlying generic essence that is not itself prey to historical or logical becoming (Finelli 1987, 117; Corradi 2005, 376–88). The crucial theoretical revolution would then be the one that passes from this fundamentally intellectualist notion of abstraction—which presumes liberation as a ‘recovery’ of the presupposed genus (putting Man where God, qua distorted humanity, had once stood)—to a vision of abstraction that, rather than depicting it as a structure of illusion, recognizes it as a social, historical, and ‘transindividual’ phenomenon (Balibar 1995, 32).

Commenting on the idea of the concrete as a synthesis of abstract determinations, as a totality of thought (*Gedankenkonkretum*), Finelli makes the following observation.

The abstract is not a product of the singular human being but of a social whole which reproduces itself in accordance with a determinate relation of production ... the abstract as mental is the result of an individual practice that moves from a presupposed totality with a concomitant, and aporetic, theory of alienation; the abstract as real is instead coterminous with a theory of totalisation as historical making, where totality is not presupposed but posited and where it can therefore be assumed as a real, and not an arbitrary, presupposition, only to the extent that it is given as result. (1987, 118)

This real-abstract movement of totalization is the movement of capital qua substance becoming ‘Subject’. This argument about the synthetic character of the concrete (the process of capital’s ‘conrescence’, to borrow a term from Whitehead) is also an argument regarding the nature of production. According to Finelli, production qua concrete totality is in fact to be understood in terms of the interaction and combination (or totalization) of ‘simple’ determinations (value, division of labor, property) into historically specific, complex configurations. While “production in general is only the offspring of bourgeois ideological abstraction” (121), the Marxian concept of production—which is, according to Finelli, a *relational* concept, first and foremost—is to be grasped, in Marx’s terms, as the concrete ‘unity of diverse aspects’. Society is above all relation: the role of these univocal simple abstractions—such as value, labor, private property—in the formation of the concrete must be carefully gauged so that they do not mutate back into those powerless and separate, not to mention mystifying, intellectual abstractions that had occupied the earlier theory of ideology. But these abstractions are not mental categories that ideally precede the concrete totality; they are real abstractions that are truly caught up in the social whole, the social relation.

Thus, against those who see abstraction as an intellectualist separation of general forms from concrete life, or, conversely, as the extraction of an essential kernel of reality from the fleeting figures of historical development, Finelli identifies the specificity and uniqueness of the post-1857 Marx in a turn *away* from the positing of a real generic essence (which abstract forms would merely hypostasize by way of inversion) and, perhaps more interestingly, in the *differential* character of Marx’s notion of abstraction, which is no longer, as in classical theories of abstraction (De Libera 1999), a suspension of or subtraction from differences. Thus, he writes, “The real abstraction of capitalist society is not a logical abstraction, far away from

differences, but rather an abstraction which is born from difference, from an entirely specific social determinateness, and it is therefore pregnant with difference, capable of articulating an entire society" (Finelli 1987, 127).

It is significant that Finelli pulls back from the ultra-Hegelian solution that would see in this "ascending from the abstract to the concrete" (Ilyenkov 1982) a strictly *logical* progression. Rather, the genesis of abstraction is *historical* (Finelli 1987, 124). The foremost exemplar of this historicity of the abstract is to be located in the real genesis of the category of abstract labor, which is treated by bourgeois ideologists as a nonproblematic and timeless abstraction that can simply be applied to "production in general" (191). On the contrary, the historical genesis of abstract labor, which is regenerated in concrete thought by the synthesis of simple determinations into an internally differentiated complex, is a paramount case of the manner in which Marx is able to delineate *the reality of (concrete) universals* in a manner that breaks radically with the history of the philosophical disputes between nominalists and realists.

In the society of capital abstraction assumes the explicit contours of a matter of fact, of a state of affairs, it becomes a practically true abstraction, indicating that only here the universal is not mere form, whether logical or superficial, but, paradoxically, a universal capable of reality ... The universal is real only when it is the fruit not of the logical intellect or even of theoretical ideation but of collective historical praxis. (Finelli 1987, 124)

What has happened, one may ask, to the initial Feuerbachian *cri de cœur* that triggered the political theory of abstraction, taking its cue from the separateness of the individual? In the mature Marx, the theme of separation is withdrawn from the humanist and intellectualist matrix and reconfigured as an effect of the real abstraction of capital, of a capital that can only integrate and socialize via the atomization of workers, their separation from the means of production and their thoroughgoing domination.

Such an interpretation sees Marx moving beyond both the Feuerbachian theme of generic abstraction and the Hegelian one of logical abstraction, and doing so by showing the properly *ontological* character of capitalist abstraction. This ontology of real abstraction—which is inextricably political, historical, and economic—is, in Finelli's view, a *dual* ontology to the extent that it both affirms concrete reality as a "specific articulation of differences" (Finelli 1987, 123; Corradi 2005, 389) and reveals the void at the heart of Capital, as it were, the fact that the Real of its abstraction—to speak in a Lacanian vein—is its absence of determinations, the fact that it has no historical or cultural *content* per se.<sup>1</sup> This duplicity of capitalism's ontological figure is founded on Marx's theory of the concrete and on the formal determination of capitalism's 'reality principle'.

1. Deleuze and Guattari are led in this respect to define contemporary capitalism through the category of the axiomatic (see Toscano 2006).

The peculiarity of the capitalist abstraction is ... that precisely its absence of determinations makes it into a reality principle, a synthetic principle valid for constructing the whole out of its own partiality: *as surplus-value* generating the material survival of all the non-working classes ... *as value*, constructing the social nexus of money and circulation ... as surplus-value capable of producing the conditions for its own production. (Finelli 1987, 227)

Though this dual ontology of abstraction might appear to slide into inconsistency by trying to hold together the differential character of capitalist society with its absence of determinations, Finelli is persuaded that capitalism as a totality is not a “generic essence, but is the historical result of a specific relation of production” (Corradi 2005, 393). This is the crux of capitalism as a society of real abstraction for Finelli: it is woven of complex material and ideological differences, but the articulation of these differences gives rise to an impersonal ‘principle’ that is itself devoid of determinations and cannot be led back to any of its constituents, certainly not to the ‘economy’ understood as a separate sphere whence abstraction would emerge.<sup>2</sup> Finelli’s case for real abstraction as “the most original element of Marxian social theory” (1987, 1) is potent. By moving beyond logicist, empiricist, and inductivist notions of abstraction and making abstraction *historically real*—indeed, defining capitalist society by its power of abstraction—Finelli brings us face to face with Marx’s theoretical and methodological revolution, a revolution that ties the singularity of real abstraction to capitalism and capitalism alone, a society ‘born from difference’ but dominated by an empty reality principle.

In his contribution to the original edition of *Reading Capital*, Jacques Rancière had already indicated Feuerbach’s “anthropological critique” as the first theory of abstraction against which Marx measured himself. Here, too, the Feuerbachian idea of abstraction as separation is deemed not to attain the threshold of *real* abstraction because of its inherent ambivalence and ultimate inconsistency: ‘It refers both to a process which takes place in reality; and at the same time to the logical steps which belong to a certain type of discourse. Abstract is in fact taken here in the sense of separated. The abstraction (separation) takes place when the human essence is separated from man, and his predicates are fixed in an alien being’ (Rancière 1989, 78). By denying both the reality and the necessity of abstraction, the anthropological critique undermines the possibility of any positive or transformative characterization of discourse. To the extent that all abstraction from the generic essence is viewed as a distortion, all discourse, Rancière argues, is condemned to the status of *reduplication*, and critique turns into a “process of transformation which transforms nothing,” “the caricature, the *begrifflose* [concept-less] Form of theoretical practice.” How might we then eschew this “ideology of the concrete” (98) that blights the elaboration of a Marxist science, and attain the reality of abstraction?

2. A similar paradox is investigated in Postone’s account of ‘abstract domination’, according to which “Marx’s theory of capital is a theory of the nature of the history of modern society. It treats history as being socially constituted and, yet, as possessing a quasi-autonomous developmental logic” (Postone 1993, 31).

This problem was, of course, the same one that, in his own take on the 1857 Introduction, Althusser had confronted in his theory of Generalities. Notwithstanding his later Leninist rectifications, much of Althusser's work can be regarded as one of the boldest attempts, starting from a Marxian framework, to produce a materialist theory of thought. And since, following the arguments we've already encountered with Finelli, the materialist balks at a theory of 'thought in general', it is not surprising that Althusser's investigation aims at discerning the reality and specificity of what he calls 'theoretical practice'. How can we vouchsafe the truth and power of abstract thought without falling prey to an empiricist or reflexive image of thought? How can we formalize the labor of thinking when thought lays claim to the status of science? Using Marx's methodological reflections to quell the empiricist temptation, Althusser begins with what may seem a provocatively 'idealist' move, albeit one that he regards as the only guarantee of the *reality* of theoretical practice: what thought works on are not things, but thoughts. In other words, we always already begin from abstractions, though these first abstractions, which Althusser places under the rubric of Generalities I [GI], are ideological, particular, unprocessed, so to speak. These abstractions, in the pejorative sense, are the 'raw material' of the theoretical production process. Following the indications of the 1857 Introduction, Althusser wishes to hold true to the Marxian claim that thought does not begin with immediacy, with the concrete, the sensual, the given.

Althusser's ingenious solution, aimed at preempting any claim that Marx himself succumbs to empiricist temptation in the Introduction (Echeverria 1989), is to *split the concrete*. Althusser's interpretation of Marx's crucial formulation in the 1857 Introduction explicitly seeks to offset the ideological notion that "the *abstract* designates theory itself (science) while the *concrete* designates the real, the 'concrete' realities, knowledge of which is produced by theoretical practice." The point, rather, is not "to confuse *two different concretes*: the *concrete-in-thought* which is knowledge, and the *concrete-reality* which is its object." In lines that the later self-criticism would object to for their 'theoreticism', Althusser argues that the "process that produces the concrete-knowledge takes place wholly in theoretical practice: of course it does concern the concrete-real, but this concrete-real 'survives in its independence after as before, outside thought' (Marx), without it ever being possible to confuse it with that other 'concrete' which is the knowledge of it" (Althusser 1996, 186; Rancière 1989). The concrete-in-thought is thus Generality III (GIII), while Generality II (GII) is the theory itself. The aim of the split effected by Althusser is not to confuse this passage from the abstract-ideological to the concrete-in-thought (GI to GIII via GII) with the classical ideological opposition between abstraction (thought, science, theory) and the concrete (the essence of the real). The theory of Generalities is thus aimed at slaying two ideological birds—Feuerbachian and Hegelian—with one theoretical stone. First, it denies the 'ideological myth' at work in the sensualist-intellectual distinction between the concrete and the abstract. Second, by affirming the *discontinuity* between GI and GIII, between mere ideological abstraction and the concrete-in-thought, it counters the Hegelian autogenesis of the concept, which it regards as an elision of the difference in kind between the three generalities (all, in their own way, 'real'): GI, qua ideological raw material; GII, qua theory; and GIII, qua concrete-in-thought produced by the work of GIII on GI.



By splitting the concrete (into real-concrete and concrete-in-thought), Althusser suggests that the only way to side with the concrete is not to denounce abstraction, but to undertake the real work of abstraction (GII) on abstraction (GI) to produce abstraction (GIII). Of course, Althusser is here straining toward another kind of ‘realism’ and ‘materialism’ than the one we may be accustomed to. It is only through abstraction—through theoretical work, that is—that the real as real-concrete can emerge and amount to something other than a ‘theoretical slogan’. This is the only way to think together the two statements that Althusser wishes to combine in his understanding of theoretical practice: “the real is the real object that exists independently of its knowledge—but which can only be defined by its knowledge,” and “the real is identical to the means of knowing it” (1996, 246). Without this work in and of theory, our opposition to ideological abstraction (like Feuerbach’s opposition of real man to the abstractions of religion, politics, and economics) will remain ... ideological. In Althusser’s acerbic terms, “The ‘concrete’, the ‘real’, these are the names that the opposition to ideology bears in ideology. You can stay indefinitely at the frontier line, ceaselessly repeating concrete! concrete! real! real! ... Or, on the contrary, you can cross the frontier for good and penetrate into the domain of reality and embark ‘seriously in its study,’ as Marx puts it in *The German Ideology*” (244–5). In the final analysis, something really *happens* when abstraction takes place. Abstraction *transforms* (and the fact that what it transforms is itself abstract does not make it any less *real*) (Echeverría 1989, 269).

Does Althusser do justice to Marx’s theoretical revolution in the study of abstraction? Revisiting a crucial text on real abstraction, Alfred Sohn-Rethel’s *Intellectual and Manual Labour* (1978), Slavoj Žižek replies in the negative. Despite the affirmation of the reality of theoretical practice as the production of concrete abstractions, and notwithstanding the attempt to rescue a concept of the real from any empiricist deviation, Althusser, Žižek contends, cannot truly grasp the uniqueness of Marx’s understanding of the relation between thought and capitalism. That is why, although Althusser is able to think of a real that is also abstract in the guise of theoretical practice, he cannot really accept the category of ‘real abstraction’. As he writes, “The ‘real abstraction’ is unthinkable in the frame of the fundamental Althusserian epistemological distinction between the ‘real object’ and the ‘object of knowledge’ in so far as it introduces a third element which subverts the very field of this distinction: the form of the thought previous and external to the thought—in short: the symbolic order” (Žižek 1989, 19).

Without venturing into the beguiling link that Žižek proposes in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* and elsewhere between the Marxian and Lacanian frameworks and the precise sense in which the notion of the symbolic might relate to our theme of abstraction, I would like to pause on this—to my mind—crucial formulation: “the form of the thought previous and external to the thought.” What might this mean within the context of Sohn-Rethel’s own account of real abstraction?

Sohn-Rethel sets off from a bold wager: to repeat, without succumbing to analogy or resemblance, Marx’s critique of political economy in the field of thought; to engage, as the subtitle of his book specifies, in a Marxian ‘critique of epistemology’. The critique is founded on a basic discovery, which Sohn-Rethel dates to 1921 and which was to be the object of numerous drafts, under thankless conditions, up to (and

following) publication of the first edition of *Intellectual and Manual Labour*:<sup>3</sup> to wit, that there obtains an “identity between the formal elements of the social synthesis and the formal components of cognition” (Sohn-Rethel 1978, 14).<sup>4</sup> The key to this identity lies in “formal analysis of the commodity” (33), which is thereby able not only to unlock the (open) secrets of capital accumulation, but to reveal their articulation with the division between manual and intellectual labor as well as the commodity’s centrality to any explanation of abstract thinking. Sohn-Rethel thus undertakes a veritable *expropriation* of abstract thought. We are not simply enjoined to move beyond the ideological habits of empiricism and to consider the social and material reality of cognition, or the solidarity between abstraction and capitalism. Sohn-Rethel is arguing—against any claim for the scientific autonomy of theoretical practice—that the fundamental forms of abstract thought (as manifest in the structure of scientific laws, the postulations of mathematics, or the constitution of the Kantian transcendental subject) all originate with the commodity-form and its introduction, into the social universe, of the principles of abstract exchange and calculability. In Žižek’s apt commentary, “Before thought could arrive at *pure* abstraction, the abstraction was already at work in the social effectivity of the market” (1989, 17).<sup>5</sup> While consideration of the historicity of abstraction and its social and collective character, on the one hand, and the Althusserian treatment of the abstract in theoretical practice, on the other, both give us a sense of the fruitful, antiempiricist directions in which the notion of abstraction may be taken, it is above all in the writings of Sohn-Rethel that a truly materialist investigation into real abstraction comes to unsettle our very image of thought.

Anticipating Finelli, Sohn-Rethel begins from the unequivocal break between Marxian and traditional philosophical abstraction. Thus, he writes, “In order to do

3. “The work of my whole intellectual life until my 90th birthday was necessary in order to clarify and explain a semi-intuition that I had in 1921 during my university studies in Heidelberg: the discovery of the transcendental subject in the commodity-form, a guiding principle of historical materialism. I could obtain a satisfying explanation of this principle only as the result of ever-renewed ‘attacks’, which took the name of *Exposés*” (in Adorno and Sohn-Rethel 2000, 183). In 1936, Adorno himself hailed Sohn-Rethel’s insight in the following terms: “your letter has meant the greatest intellectual upheaval that I have experienced in the philosophical field since my first encounter with Benjamin” (46). Alas, the rest of their correspondence testifies to Adorno’s failure, in the context of Horkheimer’s hostility to Sohn-Rethel, to be faithful to this upheaval.

4. Despite his critique of Sohn-Rethel, Postone can be seen to share a similar problem—for instance, when he states: “The problem of knowledge now becomes a question of the relation between forms of social mediation and forms of thought” (Postone 1993, 77).

5. The “apparatus of categories presupposed, implied by the scientific procedure (that, of course, of the Newtonian science of nature), the network of notions by means of which it seizes nature, is already present in the social effectivity, already at work in the act of commodity exchange ... The exchange of commodities implies a double abstraction: the abstraction from the changeable character of the commodity during the act of exchange and the abstraction from the concrete, empirical, sensual, particular character of the commodity (in the act of exchange, the distinct, particular qualitative determination of a commodity is not taken into account; a commodity is reduced to an abstract entity which—irrespective of its particular nature, of its “use value”—possesses ‘the same value’ as another commodity for which it is being exchanged)” (Žižek 1994, 301).

justice to Marx's *Critique of Political Economy*, the commodity or value abstraction, revealed in his analysis must be viewed as a *real abstraction* resulting from spatio-temporal activity. Understood in this way, Marx's discovery stands in irreconcilable contradiction to the entire tradition of theoretical philosophy and this contradiction must be brought into the open by *critical confrontation* of the two conflicting standpoints." Here lies the "contradiction between the real abstraction in Marx and the thought abstraction in the theory of knowledge" (Sohn-Rethel 1978, 21). The reason for this irreconcilable contradiction is that in the Marxian schema, to put it bluntly, *abstraction precedes thought*. More precisely, it is the social activity of abstraction, in its form as commodity exchange, that plays the pivotal role in the analysis of real abstraction. Though we cannot do justice to it, it is worth pointing out that Sohn-Rethel's attempt to look for real abstraction in the realm of exchange puts him at odds with the likes of Finelli, whose attention centers on the category of abstract *labor*, and lays him open to Moishe Postone's critique of theories of capitalist abstraction that would separate distribution from production (Postone 1993, 177–9; Garzone 2000, 20). But for Sohn-Rethel, as he writes to Adorno in 1942, it is always necessary to keep separate the "critical liquidation of the economic fetishism of manual labor ('value') and the "critical liquidation of the epistemological fetishism of intellectual labor ('logic')," only later to show the "genetic connection" of these two forms of fetishism (Adorno and Sohn-Rethel 2000, 112).

Unlike in Finelli, for Sohn-Rethel a Marxist critique of epistemology is complementary but not reducible to the critique of political economy since the "fetish-concept of logic has a different social referent with regard to the fetish-concept of value. The latter refers to the antagonism between capital and labor, the former to the antithesis between intellectual and manual labor" (Adorno and Sohn-Rethel 2000, 111). In order to understand this antithesis within labor itself, however, it is to commodity-exchange that Sohn-Rethel thinks we must turn. Here is the "thought previous to and external to the thought." It lies in the prosaic activity, the doing of commodity-exchange, and not (in both the logical and historical sense) in the individual mind of the doer. In a point that clearly speaks to Žižek's own discussion of belief and ideology as symbolic matters that have more to do with disavowed action than with false consciousness, Sohn-Rethel declares that "[i]t is the action of exchange, and the action alone, that is abstract" (1978, 26). Both intellectualism and theoreticism seem vanquished by a stance that declares that abstraction is produced by the fundamental social nexus of capitalist society. "The essence of the commodity abstraction, however, 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 metaphysical meaning. It is abstraction in its precise, literal sense ... 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" (20).

It is Marx's notion of a social *form*—a notion that is incommensurate with the *eidos* ('idea'), *morphe* ('form'), and *Begriff* ('concept') of the tradition as well as with any kind of form that might be extracted from experience by an act of cognition—that holds the key to his theoretical revolution, to the extent that it heralds an abstraction other than that of thought. This abstraction, moreover, can be used to unseat the pretensions of an ahistorical, antieconomic, philosophical *a priori*—by publicizing, as

Žižek remarks, “the disquieting fact that [the transcendental subject] depends, in its very formal genesis, on some inner-worldly, ‘pathological’ process—a scandal, a nonsensical possibility from the transcendental point of view” (1994, 302). It can also be used to account for specific historical transformations within epistemology and the practical applications thereof: the passage, for instance, averred by the history of architectural engineering, from Egyptian rope measurement to Greek geometry, about which Sohn-Rethel writes: “In order, however, to detach it from such application, a pure form of abstraction had to emerge and be admitted into reflective thought. We reason that this could result only through the generalization intrinsic in the monetary commensuration of commodity values promoted by coinage” (1978, 102). Finally, it is only through Marx’s discovery of real abstraction that we can confront some crucial social realities of capitalism to which classical philosophy is simply blind: for instance, “‘abstract things’, like *money*, and ‘abstract men’, like *bourgeois property owners*” (Sohn-Rethel 1978, 19), or, more precisely, as Sohn-Rethel wrote to Adorno in 1937, “the derivation of subjectivity in money” (Adorno and Sohn-Rethel 2000, 61) (which was the topic of his 1976 book on money as the ‘a priori in cash’).

As Virno quips, “A thought becoming a *thing*: here is what real abstraction is” (2004, 64). Sohn-Rethel’s point is perhaps even more radical: a real abstraction is also a relation, or even a thing, which *then* becomes a thought. In all these instances of the singular abstractions at work in capitalist society, we do well to heed the lesson that Žižek draws from his chiasmic reading of the Freudian theory of dreamwork and the Marxian analysis of the commodity: “the ‘secret’ to be unveiled through analysis is not the content hidden by the form (the form of commodities, the form of dreams) but, on the contrary, *the ‘secret’ of this form itself*” (1989, 11). In other words, the secret of real abstraction is precisely *an open secret*, one that is to be discerned in the operations of capitalism rather than in an ideological preoccupation with the concrete truth or hidden essence that the abstractions of capital supposedly occlude.

It is worth noting, then, that the problem of real abstraction has been carried over into an analysis of the historical specificity of contemporary capitalism, with the aim of capturing the lineaments of a knowledge-intensive, informationally driven, post-Fordist capitalism. Paolo Virno, for instance, who indicates Sohn-Rethel as a formative influence, mocks contemporary sociologists of knowledge precisely for omitting the reality of abstraction from their denunciations of capitalism in the name of praxis. Contrary to the belief that we should look for a living, if not a manual, content behind the veils of finance and fetishism, Virno resonates with Žižek in demanding that we pay attention to the open secret constituted by the abstract forms of capital. A humanist or liberationist stance that would seek the warm life of praxis ‘under’ these cold forms would thereby miss out the specificity of contemporary, post-Fordist capitalism, which is precisely to be found in the abstract connections, or real abstractions, that make society cohere. That is why Virno, in an obvious, albeit inverted, reference to Sohn-Rethel, argues forcefully for the pertinence of philosophical categories for the understanding of contemporary capitalism.

There is more history and ‘life’ in the *a priori* categories of the *Critique of Pure Reason* than in Voltaire and La Mettrie put together. The greatest of separations is also the most concrete. In the figure of an imperturbable and autonomous intellect, the era of the commodity and its ‘theological niceties’ resonates with a clarity unknown to those who think they can catch it with a fast hand. (2001, 168)

Virno also provides suggestive arguments for making sense out of the last line in the above-quoted passage from Marx’s 1857 Introduction, whereby concrete perception and sensibility are the *result* of the process of intellectual synthesis. Against any turn to a vitalist materialism, or a primacy of praxis, he remarks, “Direct perception and the most spontaneous action come *last*. This is the historical situation that comes about once the split between hand and mind manifests its *irreversibility*; when the *autonomy* of abstract intellect conditions and regulates the social productive process, on the whole and in every one of its singular aspects” (171).

However, where Virno distances himself from Sohn-Rethel is in the identification of a historical transformation within the modalities of abstraction themselves. This is because, rather than looking for real abstraction in the commodity *form*, Virno, in line with a workerist and autonomist (or postworkerist) attention to the mutations of the organization of labor and class composition, sees the most pertinent form of real abstraction *not* in the equivalential forms of value, but rather, in the centrality of intellect, innovation, and cognition in the transformed patterns of work and production in contemporary capitalism. On this point, it is worth quoting him at length.

Because it organizes the productive process and the ‘lifeworld’, the *general intellect* is indeed an abstraction, but it is a *real abstraction*, endowed with a material and operative character. Nevertheless, since it consists of knowledges, informations, and epistemological paradigms, the *general intellect* distinguishes itself in the most peremptory manner from the ‘real abstractions’ which were typical of modernity: those, that is, which give rise to the *principle of equivalence*. While money, i.e. the ‘universal equivalent’ embodies in its independent existence the commensurability of products, labor, subjects, the *general intellect* establishes instead the *analytical premises* for every kind of praxis. The models of social knowledge do not equate the various laboring activities, but present themselves as ‘immediate productive force’. They are not a unit of measurement but constitute the immeasurable presupposition for heterogeneous operative possibilities. This mutation in the nature of ‘real abstractions’—the fact, that is, that it is abstract knowledge rather than the exchange of equivalents which orders social relations—has important effects at the level of affects . . . it is the basis of contemporary *cynicism* [since it] occludes the possibility of a synthesis [and] does not offer the unit of measurement for a comparison, it frustrates every unitary representation. (Virno 2002, 149–150; Virno 2004, 63–6)

In other words, by turning our attention to the informational praxis that has become inseparable from the production of values in a supposedly knowledge- and affect-centered economy, Virno is suggesting that the ‘general intellect’ (the collective

potential for thought embodied in a cooperative multitude) *qua* real abstraction constitutes a *directly politicized form of abstraction*, which is now beyond equivalence and beyond measure, directly addressing the cooperative and socialized character of abstract knowledge. In other words, what is posited here is a real abstraction beyond the commodity form: a real abstraction that is driven not by the fetishized reality of commodity-exchange, but by the cognitive and intellectual cooperation within a 'multitude'. But is this not to lose sight of the radicality of the thesis put forward by Sohn-Rethel and paraphrased by Žižek—to wit, that under conditions of capitalism, thought is, in the final analysis, external to thought?

Remaining closer to the Marxian paradigm, and eschewing the declaration of the collapse of the law of value that grounds Virno's discussion of the general intellect, the Italian political economist Lorenzo Cillario, also sensitive to the historicity of abstraction, has attempted to renew the concept of real abstraction in light of the centrality of informational procedures within the contemporary capitalist organization of labor. He has done so within the ambit of the idea of 'cognitive capitalism'. Cillario starts, like Sohn-Rethel, from abstraction as the precondition of 'universal' measurements and equivalence (Cillario 1990, 165). He tries, however, to specify what such an abstraction might mean when it is no longer just a matter of commodity-exchange in its bare form, but of the explicit centrality of abstract processes (of models of calculation, devices of measurement, and generic procedures) within the production process itself. In an informational capitalism, what matters, according to Cillario, is the nexus between the singularity of the experience of cognition-knowledge and the universalization of this knowledge on the basis of abstraction. In a rather more orthodox reading of the socialization at work in Marx's notion of general intellect than the one provided by Virno, Cillario argues that the worker-knower can mobilize not only his capacities, but the store (capital) of scientific knowledge and practices historically accumulated by society. Thus, as a *scientific* mode of production, a 'cognitive capitalism' makes abstraction into an essential moment in the process of production. This promotion of abstraction allows for spatial integration, temporal compression, and transmissibility in a way not permitted by concrete knowledge or labor. It is also closely linked to the transformation of the production process by 'flexible specialization' (Piore and Sabel 1986)—the use of machines which, through programming, can adjust 'just-in-time' to the production of seemingly incommensurate products. In other words, abstraction enters into the very materiality of the production process and does not just concern the form of exchange.

Rather than the politicization of real abstraction that Virno gleans from the supposed collapse of labor *qua* measure, Cillario sees the current figure of real abstraction as centering on the proliferation and production of new procedures, of codes of production, of transmissible 'hows' rather than measurable 'whats'. The organizational codifications of the processes in which incommensurate use values are produced becomes central, but the locus of abstraction becomes not labor *per se*, or commodity-exchange, but the role of cognition within the laboring process. Even if procedures themselves are then subjected to the standards of exchange (i.e., they in turn become products), their centrality to a capitalism that more and more takes the figure of 'flexible accumulation' marks a mutation in the character of real

abstraction. As Cillario writes, “The incessant impetus aimed at the change in the methods and procedures of laboring activities is the generative nucleus of the abstractive process of knowledge” (1990, 168–9). The centrality of procedures also means that, in a way that is not necessarily pregnant with emancipatory possibilities, *reflexivity* is at the heart of contemporary capitalism. That is, it is not just the abstraction of capital’s forms, but its colonization of cognition, that is crucial to an understanding of the present. “The concept of abstraction which is adequate to the phase in which knowledge becomes capital stems from the reflexive character of the process of social labor” (Cillario 1990, 168; 1996, 52). In turning our attention to the specificity of real abstraction within cognitive capitalism, Cillario also does us the theoretical service of distinguishing between four levels within Marxian debates on abstraction: *abstract labor* (indifferent substance of commodities)/*real abstraction of the labor process* (organizational control of production; Fordism-Taylorism)/*abstract domination* (bifurcation into dominants and subalterns)/*reflexive abstraction* (explanation of the mutations of production in the informational age)—the last being the privileged domain, in his view, for the concept of real abstraction. Real abstraction can thus be said to move beyond its formal or methodological characterization and to become, as it were, both form and content of the process of production. “At every cycle, abstraction takes us farther from any concrete starting-points, and renders more interchangeable relative knowledges, to the extent that these are marked by the homogeneity of human activity with only minor contingent conditioning, less tied to the peculiarities of such and such an originary productive reality, or to such and such bonds, whether physico-natural (of nature) or psycho-subjective (of men); and it allows for the unceasing accumulation of these knowledges” (1990, 172). Abstractions operating on abstractions: this seems to be the key to cognitive capitalism.

What is at stake in these debates? Without retreading the same path, I would like simply to indicate two key questions that polarize attempts to come to grips with real abstraction.

The first has to do with the philosophical matrix in which the notion of real abstraction is formulated. It is entirely explicit in *Intellectual and Manual Labour*. Sohn-Rethel’s thesis regarding the identity between commodity-form and abstract thought is aimed, as he puts it, at “a critical liquidation of Kant’s enquiry” which he considers “the classical manifestation of the bourgeois fetishism of intellectual labor” (1978, 16).<sup>6</sup> What’s more, the manner in which Sohn-Rethel understands the concept of form in Marx—which is taken from the treatment of the commodity in chapter 1, book 1, of *Capital*, not from the methodological reflections of the 1857 Introduction—makes him hostile to any attempt to consider real abstraction as a concept that may in any way be indebted to a Hegelian process of determination. The opposite verdict applies to Finelli, for whom the dialectic between the real abstraction of capitalist society and the theoretical synthesis of the concrete is mediated by the category of totality. This tension between form and totality might

6. Bearing witness to his unremitting attention to the *idée fixe* of real abstraction, Sohn-Rethel had already entitled his Paris Exposé of 1937, spurred by his discussions with Walter Benjamin, “On the Critical Liquidation of Apriorism” (Adorno and Sohn-Rethel 2000, 50).

thus be said to mark a first division at the heart of the Marxian theory of real abstraction. On the one hand, we have the attempt to delve into (and ‘liquidate’) the Kantian a priori in order to excavate the role of the commodity-form in giving rise to a fetishistic perception of logic and intellectual labor; on the other, the attempt to reveal Marx’s reduction of the all-encompassing operations of the Hegelian Subject to the historically *specific* identification of a society that is subjected to, and constantly reproduces, an impersonal principle of abstract domination.

The second issue concerns the point of application, as well as the historical and logical sources of the concept of real abstraction. While, as we’ve noted, the commodity-form is the crux of Sohn-Rethel’s pioneering investigation—which also touches on money and property as ‘abstract things’—for Finelli, among others, real abstraction can only be understood in terms of the dialectic of the abstract and the concrete which is operative within the concept of abstract labor. As he writes,

the most specific characteristic of the mature thought of Marx is ... precisely the claim of the fully objective standing, within contemporary society, of the abstract, which, through its most specific content, that is *labor without qualities*, is capable of building an entire social ontology, articulated, in the network of its differences, precisely by the scansions and motions of that principle—which is not logical but terribly real—of abstraction. (Finelli, 1987, 1–2; also Postone 1993)

A second division then—which in many respects overlaps the first—would thus concern which aspect of Marx’s analysis of capital is to serve as the primary support for a theory of real abstraction, whether the momentuous effects of the very form of commodity-exchange, on the one hand, or the totalization of a society mediated by ‘labor without qualities’, on the other. While Sohn-Rethel’s approach would claim a relative autonomy for the critique of epistemology vis-à-vis the critique of political economy, a position such as Finelli’s, which seeks to develop in an ontological direction the consequences of Marx’s methodological indications in the 1857 Introduction (unlike Althusser, for instance), cannot, given its ‘Hegelian’ matrix, concede a foundational role to the separation of intellectual and manual labor. This juxtaposition of a commodity-centered and a labor-centered take on real abstraction is inevitably complicated, of course, by reckoning with the issue of cognitive and immaterial work foregrounded by the likes of Cillario and Virno, with the latter, for instance, seeking to shift the terrain beyond both abstract labor and the commodity into that of the ‘general intellect’.

The aim of this inevitably limited survey has been to outline some of the ways in which, setting out from crucial moments in the Marxian corpus, the relationship between abstract thought and capitalist reality has been investigated. Any sustained confrontation with this theme will, to my mind, have to traverse the work of these contemporary authors and some others (Postone or Chris Arthur, for example), along the way making some crucial decisions as to its own philosophical fidelities and some fraught choices regarding how to portray the conjuncture of contemporary capitalism—be it in terms of immaterial labor, cognitive capitalism, or other operative figures of abstraction. If nothing else, the debate on real abstraction tells



us why philosophers should be passionately interested in Marxism, and Marxists deeply concerned with the most recondite ontology and metaphysics.

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