

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

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There has been a renewed engagement with the idea of real abstraction in recent years. Scholars associated with the New Reading of Marx, such as Moishe Postone, Chris Arthur, Michael Heinrich, Patrick Murray, Riccardo Bellofiore and others,<sup>1</sup> have employed the idea in their important reconstructions of Marx’s critique of political economy. Alberto Toscano, Endnotes, Jason W. Moore and others have utilized and extended these theorizations to conceive of race, gender, and nature as real abstractions. Both the New Reading and these new theories of real abstraction have provided invaluable work; the former in systematizing Marx’s inconsistent and unfinished theory of value as a theory of the abstract social domination of capital accumulation and reproduction; the latter in supplementing such a theory. Yet their exclusive focus on real abstraction in relation to the critique of political economy means that the critical marxian theories of real abstraction -- developed by Alfred Sohn-Rethel, Theodor W. Adorno and Henri Lefebvre -- have been mostly bypassed by the latter and have largely served as the object of trenchant criticism for their insufficient grasp of Marx’s theory of value by the former. Consequently these new readings and new theories of real abstraction elide important aspects of Sohn-Rethel, Adorno and Lefebvre’s critiques of real abstraction; which sought to develop Marx’s critique of political economy into objective-subjective critical theories of the reproduction of capitalist society.<sup>2</sup> However, two recent works by

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1 Moishe Postone’s interpretation of real abstraction will be discussed below. For the other figures mentioned, see Chris Arthur, *The New Dialectic and Marx’s Capital* and ‘The Practical Truth of Abstract Labour, Michael Heinrich, *The Science of Value*, Patrick Murray, *The Mismeasure of Wealth* and Riccardo Bellofiore, See also the edited collections of the ISMT.

2 As I argue below Marx’s notion of accumulation entails the reproduction of the social relations in the sphere of production and circulation in the capitalist mode of production. Capitalist society refers to the objective and subjective domains of the capitalist economy as well as the state and civil society which are implicated in yet distinct from the process of capital accumulation. As hope I make clearer below a critique of the reproduction of capitalist society articulates the relationship between capital accumulation and reproduction and the reproduction of these other realms of society on the basis of a notion of capitalist society as totality.

Werner Bonefeld and Christian Lotz have taken a different tactic; drawing together elements of the critical theories of real abstraction and the new reading of real abstraction, pointing towards a new reading of the critical theory of real abstraction.

In what follows I map the development of the critique of real abstraction from its ambiguous origins to the present.<sup>3</sup> In Part One I discuss the ambiguous status of the critique of real abstraction in Marx. In Part Two I provide an overview of the development of the critique of real abstraction as a critical theory of capitalist society in Sohn-Rethel, Adorno and Lefebvre's work. In Part Three I look at their reception in the New Reading of Marx and the New Reading's systematization of the theory of real abstraction in the critique of political economy. In Part Four I compare the new theories of real abstraction developed by Toscano, Endnotes, Moore, Werner Bonefeld and Christian Lotz, pointing to the shortcomings of the former and demonstrating how the latter utilize the critique of real abstraction to integrate the critical theory of real abstraction and the new reading of real abstraction. I close by pointing to several ways this new critical theory of real abstraction can be further developed by drawing on the ideas of Sohn-Rethel, Adorno and Lefebvre and integrating the work of Toscano, Bhandar, Endnotes and Jason W. Moore.

## **I The Prehistory of Real Abstraction**

### **The critique of real Abstraction in Marx**

Marx never used the term 'real abstraction' yet he was concerned with several types of abstraction throughout his work. Of central concern to the notions of real abstraction examined in this chapter is the relationship Marx elaborated between the social constitution and constituent properties of the supra-individual socially-objective categories of political economy and the inability of utopian socialists and political economists to grasp this historically-specific process of social domination due to their ill-conceived methodology of abstraction. Marx's most concise formulation of this relationship comes in an 1846 letter to Annenkov, where he remarks that:

Mr Proudhon, chiefly because he doesn't know history, fails to see that, in developing his productive faculties, i.e. in living, man develops certain inter-relations, and that the nature of these relations

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<sup>3</sup> See Elena Louisa Lange, "Real Abstraction" in the SAGE Handbook of Marxism, forthcoming for a discussion of the development of real abstraction from a value-theoretical perspective.

necessarily changes with the modification and the growth of the said productive faculties. He fails to see that economic categories are but abstractions of those real relations, that they are truths only in so far as those relations continue to exist. Thus he falls into the error of bourgeois economists who regard those economic categories as eternal laws and not as historical laws which are laws only for a given historical development, a specific development of the productive forces. Thus, instead of regarding politico-economic categories as abstractions of actual social relations that are transitory and historical, Mr Proudhon, by a mystical inversion, sees in the real relations only the embodiment of those abstractions.<sup>4</sup>

From this perspective *Capital* can be seen as an attempt to systematically work out these insights by means of a double-faceted critique of political economy. As Marx announces in the preface to *Capital* such a critique takes a distinct 'scientific' approach to the mystified social reality of the capitalist mode of production. Since 'all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided'<sup>5</sup> where this critical science 'comes in is to show *how* the law of value asserts itself.'<sup>6</sup> On one level, Marx's critique thus unites essences and appearances by 'exposing' how the law of value asserts in which the socially constituted real abstractions of value mediate the accumulation and reproduction of capital. On another level, it criticises the discipline of political economy, in which 'the fetishism peculiar to bourgeois political economy [...] metamorphoses the social, economic character impressed on things in the process of social production into a natural character stemming from the material nature of those things.'<sup>7</sup>

Marx's method of presentation in *Capital* presents this critique in regard to 'the internal organization' of the capitalist mode of production at its 'ideal average.' This notion of presentation is based on another sense of abstraction. Marx's analysis of capitalism is presented at different levels of abstraction in *Capital*. There is some inconsistency, but on the whole, *Capital* moves from the level of the form-analysis through to more concrete levels of abstraction. This movement proceeds in what can be termed a genetic fashion, in which the different categories presented at different levels of abstraction are shown to logically derive and internally relate to each other. To cut a long story short, Marx's method of presentation demonstrates that it is the historically-specific capitalist social division of labour -- entailing production for profit by privately

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4 MECW 38.100

5 Marx 1992, 970

6 Marx, Letter to Kugelmann

[http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1868/letters/68\\_07\\_11.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1868/letters/68_07_11.htm)

7 (Marx 1993a) <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1885-c2/ch11.htm>

owned independent firms incumbent on the separation of producers from the means of production and of the sphere of production from circulation -- that creates abstract labour. Due to the former, abstract labor necessarily appears in the value relation of money and commodities. This relation, in turn, necessarily appears in the process of capitalist accumulation and reproduction. The 'movement' of this process as represented in the formulas of political economy is not a 'mere abstraction' but rather the representation of a dominating supraindividual socially objective 'abstraction in actu'<sup>8</sup> compelling capitalists to exploit workers in order to generate profit and workers to sell their labour power in order to survive. The method of Marx's presentation in *Capital* therefore unites his critical-genetic account of the constitution and constituents of the social domination of the real abstractions of the categories of value in the process of accumulation and reproduction with his presentation of this analysis at different levels of abstraction.

Marx's critique of the discipline political economy is linked to this aforementioned method of presentation. As the preceding summary has shown, Marx establishes that 'the categories of bourgeois economics' as real abstractions 'are forms of thought which are socially valid and therefore objective for the relations of production belonging to this historically determined mode of social production.'<sup>9</sup> However, since political economy only reflects upon this process 'post-festum with the results of the process of development to hand', they fail to grasp this historically specific process of social abstraction and domination, instead proceeding to treat the categories of bourgeois economics as 'natural and immutable forms of social life.'<sup>10</sup>

Yet it is important to note that Marx's double-faceted critique of political economy was incomplete and that there are important ambivalences in his account of the genesis and characteristics of real abstraction. Not only does he define abstract labor as a historically-specific social and trans-historical physiological entity,<sup>11</sup> Marx likewise equivocates as to

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8 Mecw volume 36, 111

9 Marx *Capital* Volume 1 169

10 Ibid 168

11 Marx's trans-historical definition of abstract labour is as follows that 'all labour is an expenditure of human labour, in the physiological sense, and it is this quality of being equal, or abstract, human labour, that it forms the value of commodities 137. This is contrasted with his historically specific and social definition elsewhere in which he states that 'not an atom of matter' enters into this process of abstraction in which 'value is realized only in exchange, i.e. in a social process.' (Marx 2009, 105). For a recent debate on these two definitions of abstract labour see Werner Bonefeld, "Abstract Labour: against its nature and on its time" and A Kicillof [On](#)

whether the process of abstraction takes place in production or exchange.<sup>12</sup> In addition, he also notes that that this process is only fully realized in the incarnation of world money on the world market, a point at which he never arrived in his method of presentation.<sup>13</sup> Finally, as shown above, Marx proceeds to critique political economy on the basis of an ideal model of the capitalist mode of production, abstracted from capitalist society. Thus rather than a systematic elaboration of the social constitution and reproduction of the capitalist mode of production, let alone capitalist society, in which people within the capital relation are dominated by abstractions they collectively produce behind their backs, Marx presents an intriguing if unsystematic critique of the genesis and reproduction of capital qua accumulation as a process of abstract social domination. The two approaches to real abstraction that I focus on in Part II and III would try to fill in these gaps in two different ways via the development of the critique of the abstract domination of political economy into a critical theory of the reproduction of capitalist society and then on the basis of the New Reading of Marx's theory of value that provides a systematic reconstruction and expansion of the accumulation and reproduction of capital.

## II Real abstraction and Critical Theories of Society

### Sohn-Rethel

Alfred Sohn-Rethel was the first to use term real abstraction in Marxian theory. Real abstraction was first used by Georg Simmel in *Philosophy of Money* in 1900. In part a rejoinder to what he saw as the insufficiencies of the 'objective' status of Marx's theory of value, Simmel's work promulgated a neo-Kantian 'subjective' theory of value that investigated the effects of money in the context of what he saw as

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#### [value and abstract labour: A reply to Werner Bonefeld.](#)

12 For an example of the former see Marx's statement that 'The different proportions, in which different sorts of labour are reduced to simple labour as their *standard*, are established by a social process that goes on behind the back of the producers and, consequently, seems to be fixed by custom. In the *values* coat and linen, abstraction is made from the difference of their *use-values*; now we have seen that also in the *labour* that represents itself in these values, abstraction is made from the difference of its useful forms of *tailoring* and *weaving*.' (Marx 2009, 134-5). For the latter, see the French edition of *Capital* where Marx added the following sentence: 'it is evident that one abstracts from the use-value of the commodities when one exchanges them and that every exchange relation is itself characterized by this abstraction' Quoted in (Ehrbar 2009. 439). As I show below these interpretations are represented by Sohn-Rethel and Postone.

13 Although this is mentioned at

the inextricable separation of subject from object in modern society.<sup>14</sup> For Simmel the real abstraction of value was exemplary of the latter; “Exchange, i.e. the economy, is the source of economic values” because exchange is the representative of the distance between subject and object which transforms subjective feelings into objective valuation.”<sup>15</sup>

In contrast to Marx, for Simmel the real abstraction of value was thus not an abstraction unwittingly established in action by capitalist social relations that dominated these relations. Instead this real abstraction was established by the Kantian faculties of the mind by individuals immersed in market exchange; an inevitable consequence of the complex division of labour of modern society that separated subjects from the objects they create. Instead of a historically specific-form of social domination constituent of the capitalist mode of production, real abstraction was thus the hallmark of the tragedy of modern culture.

As his use of the term implies, Sohn-Rethel’s theory of real abstraction brings together these concerns, developing an immanent criticism of the neo-Kantian tragedy of culture on a marxian basis. This was done by establishing a socio-historical relationship between Kantian scientific understanding and the class division between intellectual and manual labor by elaborating upon Marx’s theory of the exchange abstraction. In so doing, Sohn-Rethel can be said to provide a critical social theory of real abstraction insofar as the subjective properties of the faculties of scientific thought and the objective division between intellectual and manual labor are inextricably linked to and integral to the perpetuation of capitalist society.

Such a critical theory was established by drawing on the critique of political economy. For Sohn-Rethel’s critical Marxism was premised on the notion that “Marxian thinking is undogmatic and critical to the core.”<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, Sohn-Rethel held that Marx’s methodology entailed “an approach to reality, but by way of the ‘critique’ of the historically given consciousness,”<sup>17</sup> which consisted in ‘tracing the genetical origin of any current ideas and concepts, on the very standards of the social existence determining ideas and concepts.’<sup>18</sup> In Marx’s case, according to Sohn Rethel, such a method was employed to critique the ‘particular mode of consciousness of political economy’ as the necessary false

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14 See David Frisby’s introduction to the Philosophy of Money as well as Joel Windor, The Tragedy of Concept Formation

15 Simmel p. 73. quoted in Reichelt, social validity p.15

16 Sohn Rethel IML 192.

17 Sohn Rethel 194-5

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consciousness of capitalist society, by unveiling 'the historical origin of the seemingly timeless concept of 'value', and thus to aid the overcoming of such a society. However, given some inconsistencies in Marx's work, his inability to grasp its full importance, and the socio-historical transformations that had occurred in the 100 odd years between the publication of *Capital* and *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, Sohn-Rethel also held that "an extension to Marxist theory" was "needed for a fuller understanding of our own epoch."<sup>19</sup>

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

This critique was established by Sohn-Rethel's development of the 'formal', rather than the 'labour', aspect of Marx's analysis of the commodity. According to Sohn-Rethel, the latter 'holds the key not only to the critique of political economy, but also to the historical explanation of the abstract conceptual mode of thinking and of the division of intellectual and manual labour, which came into existence with it.'<sup>20</sup> This is because the real abstraction of value is created by the social synthesis of a class antagonistic division of intellectual and manual labour. For, drawing on Marx's notion that 'they do it but they are not aware of it':

the abstraction comes about by force of the action of exchange, or, in other words, out of the exchanging agents practising their solipsism against each other. The abstraction belongs to the interrelationship of the exchanging agents and not to the agents themselves. For it is not the individuals who cause the social synthesis but their actions in exchange, the action is social, the minds are private.<sup>21</sup>

Contra Simmel such a process of abstraction thus proceeds from a class antagonistic sociohistorical basis, not the mind confronted by an inevitably complex modern society.<sup>22</sup> Moreover the very qualities of

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19 P. 1

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22 "this abstract and purely social physicality of exchange has no existence other than in the human mind, but it does not spring from the mind. It springs from the activity of exchange and from the necessity for it which arises owing to the disruption

Simmel's neo-Kantian epistemology, and scientific understanding in general -- what Sohn-Rethel terms 'conceptual abstraction' -- are likewise said to correspond and issue from the properties of the exchange abstraction generated by such a society. Thus, in contrast to bureaucratic socialism and the tragedy of culture, these subjective and objective entities are inextricably linked to the antagonistic social synthesis of class society and thus integral to reproducing these societies. For

the origin of the pure intellectual concepts from the spatio-temporal reality of social being, their character as reflections of the abstraction enshrined in money, hence their nature as offshoots from the reification upon which hinges the cohesion of exchange society, their essential use as forms of socialised thinking, their antithetic relation to manual labour, their accessory link with the class division of society.<sup>23</sup>

Overcoming class antagonism would thus entail the overcoming of the division of intellectual and manual labour, enabling human flourishing in truly socialist forms of production that overcome this division.

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

## **Adorno**

As their correspondence shows, Adorno was an enthusiastic supporter of Sohn Rethel's critique of real abstraction, even if Adorno's parallel project differentiated itself in important, if often neglected, ways. This can be seen in Adorno's famous statement in *Negative Dialectics* that "Alfred Sohn-Rethel was the first to point out that ... in the general and

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of communal production into private production carried on by separate individuals independently of each other."

<sup>23</sup> Sohn Rethel 203



necessary activity of the Spirit, inalienably social labor lies hidden.”<sup>24</sup> For, as I will now show, this passage points to the similarities and differences between Sohn-Rethel and Adorno’s critical theory of real abstraction.

Like Sohn-Rethel, Adorno also characterized his critical theory of society as an attempt to extend Marx’s critique of political economy to the current epoch through his own interpretation of Marx’s theory of exchange. However, unlike Sohn Rethel, as the quotation from *Negative Dialectics* indicates, such a critique entailed an account of the social formation of epistemology via the fetishistic exchange abstraction that brought together Marx and Kant as well as Hegel. Moreover, this notion of abstraction was also tied to Adorno’s theory of social domination and the formation of maimed subjectivity. Thus whilst both Sohn Rethel and Adorno can be said to formulate theories of real abstraction that elucidate the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity in order to critique the reproduction of capitalist society, Adorno’s critical theory possesses these distinct points of emphasis.

Adorno’s critical social theory of the fetishistic exchange abstraction thus sought to supplement what he saw as two important theoretical insufficiencies in Marx’s critique of political economy. In the first place, Adorno held that Marx’s lacked a ‘completely developed notion of dialectics’<sup>25</sup> and “out of disgust for petty academic squabbles rampaged through ... epistemological categories like the proverbial bull in the china-shop.”<sup>26</sup> In the second, since Marx’s prognostications of pauperization and revolution had not come about, but his law of crisis was nonetheless the ‘model’ of a dialectic concept of meaning’, in which societal essence which shapes appearances, appears in them and conceals itself in them,’ ‘modifications’ in historical development ‘should also be derived from it.’<sup>27</sup> Therefore, since ‘exchange was still key to society’ Adorno endeavored to develop a dialectical critique of society that addressed these gaps.

These concerns were addressed by Adorno in his late work through the internally related ideas of society as subject, society as object, exchange and conceptuality. For Adorno, society is subject and object by virtue of the fetishistic exchange abstraction, which is unwittingly constituted by individuals within the class relation and takes on the autonomous

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24 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, *Redirection of the Subjective Reduction* 178-180  
<http://members.efn.org/~dredmond/ND2Trans.txt>

25 Adorno *Positivist Dispute* 24

26 (Adorno 2001, *Materialism Imageless*)

<http://members.efn.org/~dredmond/ND2Trans.txt>

27 Adorno, *Positivist dispute*, 37

supraindividual properties of a 'mediating conceptuality', inverting to dominate and maim the subjects who collectively create the former, compelling them to reproduce capitalist society.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, 'since, 'the abstraction ... in question is really the specific form of the exchange process itself, the underlying social fact through which socialization first come about'<sup>29</sup> this means that 'The law which determines how the fatality of mankind unfolds itself is the law of exchange;'<sup>30</sup> a 'mediating conceptuality' that is 'independent both of the consciousness of the human beings subjected to it and of the consciousness of the scientists.'<sup>31</sup>

Consequently, as the necessary consciousness of the false society, Adorno characterized the conceptuality of exchange as the 'phenomenology of the non-mind', which constitutes epistemology via the process of 'socialization.' Like Sohn-Rethel the origins of scientific epistemology thus lie in the exchange abstraction. Yet, in contrast to Sohn-Rethel, this relationship is not characterized by enumerating the analogous properties that exchange and the categories of the understanding possess, but via the derivation of the transcendental subject and with it the categories of understanding from the domination of the exchange abstraction. Hence 'transcendental universality is no mere narcissistic self-exaltation of the I .. but has its reality in the domination which ends up prevailing and perpetuating itself through the exchange-principle.'<sup>32</sup>

Taken in tandem with Adorno's periodization of late capitalism<sup>33</sup>-- wherein Marx's theory of crisis had been counteracted by the affluence of the 'Keynesian Golden age' -- Adorno's utilized his theory of the fetishistic exchange abstraction to account for an integrated mass society. For Adorno, the resultant social totality was 'negative', the objects of which were no longer merely the masses, but also the administrators and their hangers-on under the sway of the objective

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28 Adorno's exposition of this process of abstraction provided in its most cohesive form in his 1962 seminar Marx. For shorter variations see also sociology and empirical research as well as introduction to sociology 31-32. For a detailed reconstruction of Adorno's account of this process see my forthcoming introduction to the translation of the 1962 seminar

29 Adorno, Intro to sociology, 31

30 Positivist dispute 80

31 ibid

32 Adorno, on the interpretation of the transcendental 180-182

33 For a thorough discussion of Adorno's periodization of late capitalism see O'Kane "Society continues to reproduce itself despite the catastrophes that may eventuate"

illusion of the fetishistic exchange abstraction which ‘ dominates reality.’<sup>34</sup>

Therefore not only did the formation of the transcendental subject establish an epistemological framework that cannot grasp its own genesis, but it also deformed subjectivity. As ‘a relationship between human beings’ that is ‘just as much founded in them as it comprehends and constitutes them, the ‘universal domination of exchange-value over human beings,’ maims individuals; rendering them “powerlessly dependent on the whole,”<sup>35</sup> compelling them to reproduce society for the sake of self-preservation.

Yet, Adorno also held that the exchange abstraction was a fetishistic objective illusion and that ‘totality was a critical category’<sup>36</sup> oriented toward the subject. His critical theory of thus sought to cultivate the autonomy of subjects by pointing to the contradictory character and ultimate irrationality of the antagonistic social relations that constitute the exchange abstraction and reproduce the domination, maiming, and misery inherent in such society; in order to negate it. Hence Adorno’s notion of the fetishistic exchange abstraction mirror’s Sohn-Rethel’s notion of real abstraction insofar as the former is the fulcrum of Adorno’s extrapolation of Marx’s theory of value into a critique of the objective subjective reproduction of capitalist society.

## **Lefebvre**

Henri Lefebvre is often portrayed as the “leading prophet of alienation.”<sup>37</sup> Yet his lifelong project of critiquing the reproduction of capitalist society via his elaboration of the domination of lived experience in his critique of everyday life, cities and space, was likewise centered on a critical marxist critique of fetishistic concrete abstraction that paralleled Sohn-Rethel and Adorno’s work.<sup>38</sup>

Like Sohn-Rethel and Adorno, for Lefebvre, Marx’s theory was ‘not a system or dogma’ , but rather a ‘starting point that is indispensable for

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34 Adorno, Late capitalism or Industrial Society?

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/adorno/1968/late-capitalism.htm>

35 Adorno, Redirection of the Subjective Reduction 178-180

36 Adorno, Late Capitalism

37 Merrifield, 2006 xxxii;

38 This section draws on O’Kane Fetishistic concrete abstraction, social constitution and social domination in Henri Lefebvre’s writings on everyday life, cities and space <http://journals.sagepub.com/eprint/wvnKM9GkcpGsDTeDkNgM/full>

understanding the present-day world.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, like these two thinkers, Lefebvre held that Marx's 'basic concepts' had 'to be elaborated, refined, and complemented by other concepts where necessary' (p. 188). Consequently, again mirroring these figures, Lefebvre's critique of real abstraction, was thus developed in regard to his complementary elaboration of the relationship between his interpretation of fetishistic concrete abstraction in the critique of political economy and a critique of the domination of lived experience in the subjective objective entities of everyday life, cities, and space in capitalist society.

Lefebvre's interpretation of fetishistic concrete abstraction entailed conceiving of 'social reality, i.e., interacting human individuals and groups', creates '*appearances* which are something more and else than mere illusions' for these 'appearances are the modes in which human activities manifest themselves within the whole they constitute at any given moment'. What Lefebvre called 'concrete abstractions' are thus real abstractions because these appearances are 'abstract' social forms which are nonetheless 'concrete' since they are constituted by social labor.<sup>40</sup> Like Sohn-Rethel and Adorno, Lefebvre even stressed that that these concrete abstractions are not created by the mind, but possess a 'practical power'. They 'have a concrete, objective reality: historically (as moments of the social reality) and actually (as elements of the social objectivity)'<sup>41</sup> For

the starting-point for this abstraction is not in the mind, but in the practical activity; the essential characteristics of sense-perception cannot be correctly deduced from an analysis of thought, but from an analysis of the productive activity and of the product. Abstraction is a practical power.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, mirroring Adorno, Lefebvre emphasized that the extent of form-determinate domination is limited. 'For the logic of commodities ... does not succeed in forming a permanent closed system'. This is because the 'complex determinations' of 'human labour' are 'not entirely taken over by this form.'<sup>43</sup> Rather, the transformation of humans into things is prevented by the internal opposition of the qualitative content of these forms.

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39 Lefebvre 1968, p. 77

40 Lefebvre 2009, p. 76

41 Lefebvre 2009 pp. 76–77

42 Lefebvre 2009, 109

43 Lefebvre 1968, 100

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

These three approaches to the domination of lived experience are brought together in *The Production of Space* in which the 'theory of social space encompasses ... the critical analysis of urban reality and ... everyday life'. From this perspective, Lefebvre's theory of social space can be characterized as a critical social theory that attempted to critique the reproduction of capitalist society via his utilization and enhancement of the critique of political economy as a critique of real fetishistic concrete abstraction. For, "If the critique of political economy ... were ... to be resumed, it would no doubt demonstrate how that political economy of space corresponded exactly to the self-presentation of space as the worldwide medium of the definitive installation of capitalism."<sup>44</sup> Accordingly,

Social relations, which are concrete abstractions, have no real existence save in and through space. *Their underpinning is spatial*. In each particular case, the connection between this underpinning and the relations it supports calls for analysis. Such an analysis must imply and explain a genesis and constitute a critique of those institutions, substitutions, transpositions, metaphorizations, anaphorizations, and so forth, that have transformed the space under consideration.<sup>45</sup>

From this it follows that the 'concrete abstraction' of the commodity form possesses a 'social' 'practical power,' which has a social underpinning given that it is produced by social labor. Marx's critique of the commodity-form must then be supplemented by a critique of the abstract space it inhabits. Moreover, abstract space is thus generated by social labour and possesses the same characteristics of a concrete abstraction as the commodity-form, money and capital. This means that all three of these abstract forms of 'neo-capitalism,' (which also includes analogous types of bureaucracy) are embedded in what Lefebvre terms 'spatial practice'; a wide-ranging category that 'subsumes the problems of the urban sphere (the city and its extensions)' and 'everyday life', where the domination of abstract space transforms 'lived experience' and 'bodies' into 'lived abstractions', maiming them and compelling them to reproduce capitalist society.<sup>18</sup> Yet, because 'capitalism and the bourgeoisie can achieve nothing but abstractions', spatial practice is also a contradictory space where abstract space and the concrete

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44 Lefebvre production of space 104

45 Lefebvre, production of space, 404

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

As I have shown, Lefebvre's critique of the real abstraction of abstract space drew on his interpretation of fetishistic forms of concrete abstraction; complementing Marx's critique of political economy by showing where the concrete abstraction of the 'great fetish' forms of domination emerge and how they dominate and regulate life in the realm of spatial practice. At the same time, the real abstraction of abstract space is opposed by the qualitative contents of concrete space. Consequently, mirroring Sohn-Rethel and Adorno, Lefebvre's notion of concrete abstraction can be said to be integral to his critical theory of the reproduction of capitalist society via his elaboration of the domination of lived experience by the real abstractions of capitalist society in abstract space. Moreover, further echoing Sohn-Rethel and Adorno, In promulgating such a critique, Lefebvre holds that via such a critique man can become 'conscious of' and 'transcend the momentary form" of these "relations' seizing on the inherently human content and annulling the concrete abstractions that oppose them with "practical methods', and 'with practical energy.'<sup>46</sup>As a whole, these critical theories of real abstraction thus drew on and developed Marx's critique of political economy into critical theories of the reproduction of capitalist society.

### **III Real Abstraction and the New Reading of Marx**

The critical theoretical lineage of what known as the New Reading of Marx is marked by the influence of Sohn-Rethel, Adorno and, to a lesser degree, Lefebvre.<sup>47</sup> Yet as these designations imply, thinkers in this strand of scholarship – such as Hans-Georg Backhaus, Helmut Reichelt, Moishe Postone and Chris Arthur-- are primarily concerned with developing a systematic reconstruction, rather than supplementation of Marx's critique of political economy. Consequently, as I now show, these thinkers tend to have an ambiguous relationship with Adorno, Sohn-Rethel, and even Lefebvre's critiques of real abstraction. On one hand, they are undoubtedly influenced by their conception of the critique of political economy as a critique of the social constitution of social

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46 Lefebvre, Critique of Everyday life, 38

47 The critical-theoretical lineage refers to thinkers who develop their new reading of marx within the tradition of critical theory and includes not only students of Adorno but thinkers in other critical marxist traditions, such as Open Marxism. This distinguishes them from others who work within this theoretical discourse, such as Michael Heinrich and Chris Arthur, who are influenced by the work of Backhaus, Reichelt etc. but do not see their attempts to reconstruct the critique of political economy as part of the critical theoretical tradition.

domination. Yet, on the other hand, even if they sometimes pose their work as resolving problems in the Marxian bases of Adorno, Sohn-Rethel's and Lefebvre's theories, they also lodge trenchant criticisms of these thinkers in their respective reconstructions of Marx's theory of value. Finally, whilst these scholars contributions and criticisms have proven invaluable, they have also had the unintended consequences of shifting and narrowing the purview of the critique of real abstraction from the critical theory of the reproduction of capitalist society to the critique of the accumulation and reproduction of the capitalist mode of production.

## Postone

Moishe Postone's seminal work, *Time, Labor and Social Domination*, undertakes a critical-theoretical reconstruction of Marx's critique of political economy that systematizes Marx's ambiguous theorization of abstract labor. For Postone, it is ultimately the historically-specific reciprocal determination of concrete and abstract labor in conjunction with abstract time that compulsively mediates the 'treadmill' dynamic of capitalist accumulation and reproduction. The cornerstone of this interpretation is Postone's argument that "in Marx's analysis, the category of abstract labor expresses this real social process of abstraction; it is not simply based on a conceptual process of abstraction."<sup>48</sup> This means that for Postone the critique of real abstraction is tantamount to the critique of political economy as a historically-specific critique of labour.

On this basis, Postone puts forward pertinent and trenchant criticisms of Sohn-Rethel's notion of real abstraction as 'not a labor abstraction but an exchange abstraction.' For, as Postone rightly notes "Sohn-Rethel ... does not relate the notion of labor abstraction' but that of exchange 'to the creation of alienated social structures.'<sup>49</sup> This means that Sohn-Rethel treats classless society as tantamount to abolishing exchange, not the capitalist division of labour.

Moreover, as Postone, intriguingly argues Sohn-Rethel's notion of the exchange abstraction undermines his corresponding critique of epistemology. In this first place, it "weakens his sophisticated attempt at an epistemological reading of Marx's categories." In the second, his "emphasis on exchange, which excludes any examination of the

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48 Postone, TLSD 152

49 For an elaboration of this critique of Sohn-Rethel's notion of real abstraction see Anselm Jappe, Sohn-Rethel and the Origin of Real Abstraction

implications of the commodity form for labor, restricts his social epistemology to a consideration of forms of static, abstract mechanical thought” necessarily excludes many forms of modern thought from the purview of his critical social epistemology’, thus preventing Sohn-Rethel from “dealing with nineteenth- and twentieth-century forms of thought in which the form of capital-determined production itself takes on a fetishized form.”<sup>50</sup> Postone’s extant work has thus far focused on developing his own epistemological reading of Marx’s categories as subjective forms of thought generated by the real abstraction of labour. He has also developed an important critique of the epistemology of anti-semitism as a forshortened and regressive critique of capitalism. However, he has yet to provide a critique of scientific understanding in correlation to this critique of labor in the manner of Sohn-Rethel or in general to extend his systematic reconstruction of the critique of political economy into a critique of the reproduction of capitalist society.<sup>51</sup>

## Reichelt

Helmut Reichelt argues that ‘The ‘principle of exchange’ and, connected to this, the ‘exchange abstraction’ as ‘real abstraction’ form a central component of Adorno’s concept of society.’<sup>52</sup> This is because “Adorno’s critical theory ... understands the capitalist economy as an inverted reality in which individuals no longer ‘interact with one another’ on the market as rationally acting subjects, as the idea of the exchange economy suggests.”<sup>53</sup> Yet, as Reichelt perceptively points out, despite its programmatic status in Adorno’s critical theory, Adorno only ‘assumes’ that the whole economy is to be developed out of the exchange principle, meaning that “How this process of autonomisation is to be conceptualised in detail is not explained by Adorno” leaving “the central concepts – objective abstraction, inversion, autonomisation, totality, power of the universal over the particular” as “postulates with regard to their concretisation as far as the critique of economics is concerned.”<sup>54</sup>

From this vantage point, Reichelt proceeds to develop such a notion of real abstraction with regard to his elaboration of Marx’s monetary theory of value. According to Reichelt such a theory held that the atomized

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50 Postone, 178

51 This is because whilst here and elsewhere Postone points to the relations between the treadmill dynamic, the state, crises, and mass psychology it is unfortunately the case that he has yet to systematically elaborate them.

52 Reichelt, Marx’s Critique of Economic Categories, 3

53 Reichelt, Marx’s Critique of Economic Categories, 5

54 Reichelt, Marx’s Critique of Economic Categories 6



capitalist process of production for exchange constituting a sensible supersensible

inverted world, in which sensuousness in its widest sense -- as use-value, labor, exchange with nature -- is demoted to a means of the self perpetuation of an abstract process that underlies the whole objective world of constant change... the whole sensuous world of human beings who reproduce themselves through the satisfaction of needs and labor is step-by-step sucked into this process, in which all activities "are themselves inverted."<sup>55</sup>

This is because the sensible productive activity of individuals within the class relation of the capitalist social division of labour are necessarily realized and mediated by the supersensible real abstractions of the value-forms of political economy, resulting in the accumulation and reproduction of capital. Whilst Reichelt's early work attempted to reconstruct this theory of value based on Marx's esoteric writings, his later work held that Marx's monetary theory of value was incomplete, and Reichelt attempted to complete and systematize the former the basis of his notion of validity. Whilst such a notion of validity has its detractors<sup>56</sup>, it is also important to note that in spite of his starting point, Reichelt's systematization of Marx's theory of value refrains from addressing how such an interpretation solves the aforementioned gap in Adorno's interpretation of Marx, let alone how it pertains to Adorno's critical theory of society, nor has Reichelt used this formulation of Marx's theory of value to articulate the reproduction of capitalist society.

## **Kerr**

Finally, as Derek Kerr points out, Lefebvre's theory of abstract space refrains from properly integrating Marx's theory of accumulation. Instead by 'separating out contradictions of space from those in space and by reducing class struggle and history to the latter, it is not clear what constitutes the contradictions of space.' This is because, in 'abandoning the Marx of *Capital*', Lefebvre's theory of 'the relation between the mode of production and its space is never specified.'<sup>57</sup> in contrast, drawing on the early work of Werner Bonefeld, Kerr argues that Marx's project was to uncover 'the contradictory constitution of the capital relation as it attempts to transform and express itself through the spatial and temporal modalities of existence.'<sup>58</sup> Whilst making the incisive point that it is the time of surplus production that is realized in

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55 Reichelt, social reality as appearance 46/-7

56 See Lange for an overview of the criticism of Reichelt's notion of validity.

57 Kerr, Trial by Space, 25

58 Kerr, Trial by Space, 32

the relation between time and abstract space, Kerr has not explored the relationship between these forms of real abstraction, abstract space, and the domination of lived experience as proposed by Lefebvre.

In sum, the New Reading of Marx is undoubtedly correct at pointing to the systematic shortcomings in the value-theoretical bases of Sohn Rethel, Adorno and Lefebvre's critical social theories of real abstraction. Postone and Reichelt systematizations of the ambiguous aspects of Marx's theory of value that elaborate the constitution and reproduction of capital via the social objectivity of abstract labor and the forms of value are likewise important conceptions of real abstraction. Yet one cannot help but note that the unintended consequences of the new reading has been to diminish the status of the critical theory of real abstraction; reducing it to an errant ersatz reading of the critique of political economy.

In the next section I argue that this approach has served as the basis for a number of new theories of real abstraction developed by Toscano, Bhandar, Endnotes and Jason W. Moore. I then contrast this approach with the recent work of Werner Bonefeld, which has brought together the new reading of Marx and the critical theory of society. I close by arguing that the second should be further developed to articulate what I will call the New Reading of the Critical Theory of Real Abstraction by drawing on Sohn-Rethel, Adorno, Lefebvre as well as integrating the insights of Toscano, Bhandar, Endnotes and Jason W. Moore to develop the New Reading of the Critical Theory of Real Abstraction.

#### **IV New Theories of real abstraction**

Alberto Toscano's widely influential series of works on the notion of real abstraction can be said to be both representative and influential on these new theories of real abstraction. In his first and most influential article, 'The Open Secret of Real Abstraction'<sup>59</sup>, Sohn-Rethel's theory is depicted as part of the 'debate on real abstraction.' According to Toscano this debate centers on the interpretation of Marx's introduction to *the Grundrisse* and includes a number of scholars from divergent theoretical perspectives<sup>60</sup> who are said to have elaborated theories of real abstraction defined "in terms of both the methodology of Marxism and the logic and ontology of capitalism."<sup>61</sup> Toscano does point out that

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59 Alberto Toscano, The Open Secret of Real Abstraction

60 Although he refrains from mentioning Adorno or Lefebvre, Toscano does include Althusser, someone Sohn Rethel influenced (Virno,) and a number of current scholars (Finelli, Zizek and Postone) as participants.

61 Toscano, 273

Sohn-Rethel differentiates his critique of epistemology from the critique of political economy and bases his notion of real abstraction on commodity fetishism rather than the 1857 introduction. Yet

a number of scholars have followed or collaborated with Toscano<sup>62</sup> in formulating new theories of the real abstractions of race, property, gender and nature on the basis of elaborating the systematic roles these social phenomena play in the logic and ontology of capitalist accumulation on the basis of a Marxian, rather than Sohn-rethelian or critical theoretical, methodology that draws on the new reading.

Toscano's work with Bhandar<sup>63</sup> thus brings the value-theoretic interpretation of real abstraction together with Hall, Althusser, Dunbar Ortiz, Locke and others to conceive of property and race as 'real abstractions' by virtue of their integral roles in the accumulation of capital. In addition, Endnotes, the Logic of Gender<sup>64</sup> argues that gender is a historically specific real abstraction on the basis of a process of systematic dialectical derivation taken from Arthur and Postone's value-form theory. Here gender is posited as a real abstraction by virtue of the role it plays in the accumulation and reproduction of capital. Finally, drawing on Toscano, Jason W. Moore<sup>65</sup> argues that the historical creation of Nature as a real abstraction is the underlying condition of capital accumulation insofar as relegating the ecosystem and non-white males to the realm of nature is the premise that appears these results.

These new theories certainly focus on important types of domination integral to capitalist society, which as we have seen were not included in the critical theories of real abstraction. Yet, as I indicate, insofar as they conceive of these phenomena as 'real abstractions' by virtue of the roles that they play in the logic and ontology of accumulation and reproduction of capital, they refrain from elaborating how these social phenomena are objective/subjective entities that are implicated in the wider process of the reproduction of capitalist society. Hence race, gender and nature are established as objective categories of the capitalist economy by virtue of the role they play in accumulation. Yet in eschewing the subjective components of these phenomena or the non-economic roles they play in

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62 I refrain from discussing Toscano's discussion of abstraction in his work with Kinkle, *Cartographies of the absolute*, as the notion is used there more in terms of the proper methodology of abstraction in regard to Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping.

63 Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano, 'Race, Real Estate and Real Abstraction'

64 Endnotes, *The Logic of Gender*

65 Jason W. Moore, *Nature/Society & the Violence of Real Abstraction* lays an argument in more detail that is also made in *Capitalism in the Web of Life and History of the World in Seven Cheaps Things*

capitalist society, they not only eschew the experience of domination, but occlude their roles in the larger dynamic of the reproduction of capitalist totality. This means that an objective subjective theory of the relationship between different social spheres is glossed over in favor a theory of the proper derivation of economic categories, eschewing a critical theory of society in favor of a systematic deepening of the critique of political economy that nonetheless provides a foreshortened critique of these social phenomena. In contrast, the recent work of Bonefeld and Lotz has brought together the the new reading of Marx with the critical theory of society in a manner that eschews these shortcomings.

## **V New critical theories of real abstraction**

Much like these new theories of real abstraction Werner Bonefeld's recent *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy* calls for the development of the critical interpretation of Marx rather than a reconstruction. In elaborating the former, however, Bonefeld brings the New Reading together with Adorno's late critical theory of society. This entails envisioning society as a negative totality characterized by unity as disunity constituted and reproduced by the relations between subject and object. On this basis, Bonefeld criticizes, synthesizes, and further develops the New Reading. He points out that Postone's historically specific critique of labour and Reichelt's monetary theory of value ultimately complement each other; filling in their respective blind spots. Moreover, Bonefeld grounds Postone's historically specific critique of labour on primitive accumulation, whilst also developing an Adornian notion of class as a negative constraint that compels individual action. Finally, Bonefeld also supplements this systematic development of economic categories with a theory of the state and world market that conceptualizes the former as 'the concentrated force of social order.' The state, thus not only 'depoliticizes the socio-economic relations and so guarantees contractual relations of social interaction, secures the free and equal market relations and maintains the social relations founded on equality, freedom and utility'<sup>66</sup> but also cultivates entrepreneurial instincts via vitalpolitics. These social, economic, and political premises characteristic of unity as disunity appear in 'the form of a movement of real economic abstractions that, endowed with an invisible force, govern

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66 185-6

over and prevail through the social individuals'<sup>67</sup> compelling the reproduction of the separated unity of capitalist society. As the 'anamesis of the genesis' the critique of political economy as a critical theory of society reduces this overarching social dynamic to the historically-specific social relations that constitute and reproduce such a society.

Christian Lotz's notion of the capitalist schema amounts to a return to Marx via Sohn-Rethel and Adorno that also proceeds to re-read Adorno and Sohn Rethel in conjunction with the new reading of Marx. For Lotz argues that money, rather than Kantian epistemology, is a real abstraction that via its totalizing process of socialization schematizes and thus creates subjectivity. For Lotz, The effect of the capitalist schema is profound'; it 'frames the whole of social relations under capitalism, as well as determines the *form* of everything that becomes subordinated to capital and its temporal horizons.'<sup>68</sup> Lotz proceeds to sketch a re-reading of the culture industry on this basis; remedying Adorno's deficient understanding of the critique of political economy by building on his notion of schematism. Accordingly, Adorno's notion of "total socialization" [*totale Vergesellschaftung*] of a "subjectless subject" (Adorno 2003a, 23) is only possible through the fluidity of capital as existing in the general intellect and its communicability i.e., in every aspect of life"<sup>69</sup> which as 'industries that take on the whole mental apparatus of capitalist individuals'<sup>70</sup> produce thought, experience and reflection via the relationship between schematization, real abstraction accumulation and social reproduction. Like Bonefeld, Lotz's theory of real abstraction unites the new reading with the critical theory of real abstraction to show how the objective subjective elements of social totality are mediated and reproduced via the real abstraction of money.

## Conclusion

Bonefeld and Lotz's work point towards how I contend the theory of real abstraction might be further developed, not merely as a reconstruction or systematic elaboration of Marx's theory of value but through the integration of critical theories and new readings of real abstraction.

Such a New Reading of the Critical Theory of Real Abstraction might be further developed via productively drawing together the critical theories of real abstraction and the new readings of real abstraction in a number

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67 Bonefeld 64

68 Lotz 114.

69 Lotz 129

70 Lotz (xxi)

of ways. For instance, Sohn-Rethel's critique of the division between intellectual and manual labor might be joined with Postone's insights to critique the recent ground swell of support for bureaucratic notions of social democracy as well as the implicit continuation of this separation in promethean notions of accelerationsism fully automated luxury communism. Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, Adorno's notion of the relation between accumulation, reproduction and maimed subjectivity can be brought to bare in the reactionary, rather than liberatory, responses to the 2008 crisis.<sup>71</sup> In addition, Greig Charnock and Japhy Wilson's work<sup>72</sup> also provides the bases for critical Marxian readings of abstract space qua time that might incorporate the elements of Lefebvre's notions of the abstract domination of lived experience. Finally, the notions of race, gender and Nature as real abstraction developed by Toscano and Bhandar, Endnotes and Jason W. Moore might be integrated into such an approach leading to the articulation of the subjective and non-economic domination of these types of subjectivity in the reproduction of capitalist society. Following this line of development would not only widen the scope of contemporary theories of real abstraction but return the theory to its integral role in critical theories of the reproduction of capitalist society.

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71 See O'Kane, "society Maintains Itself"

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