Concrete-in-Thought, Concrete-in-Act: Marx, Materialism and the Exchange Abstraction

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Abstract: Marx's distinction between concrete-in-thought and concrete-in-reality does not invoke a conceptual or empirical difference but a *difference-in-act*. This difference is verified in social practice rather than in thought. The actuality of practice verifies that of thought without there being a metaphysical correspondence between them. While thought can adequately represent the structure of practice, there is no similarity or resemblance between the structure of thought (what is concrete-in-thought) and that of practice (concrete-in-reality). What is concrete-in-reality is a practical act whose nature does not reveal itself either to those executing it or to the theoretical consciousness that takes the consciousness of practitioners as its starting point. This has ramifications for Marx's critique of reification as well as his distinction between 'living' and 'dead' labour. I argue that Marx's critique of reification is epistemological, not ontological, and that the contrast between objectivating and objectified labour is not a metaphysical contrast between authentic and inauthentic existence or between lived and represented experience. Rather, it is a formal contrast between unconscious (unvalidated) practice and conscious (socially validated) activity. Nevertheless, this contrast has an ontological premise: the actuality of the exchange abstraction depends upon an act that is not actually exchanged (socially valorized).

Keywords: Marx, materialism, critique, abstraction, concrete-in-thought, practice, exchange.

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Introduction

Marx's is a materialism of abstraction. Capitalism is a system of real abstractions: commodity, value, labour, money, exchange, et al. In contrast to thought abstractions generated through intellection (such as humanity, right, justice, beauty, etc.), real abstractions are generated through social practices. Where the unity of thought abstractions defies spatiotemporal localization because it is that of transcendent generality, the unity of real abstractions defies localization because it is spread out across space and time. Real abstractions are immanent without being particular, abstract without being transcendent. Thus money, for example, is represented by ostensible particulars (whether coins, notes, or digital encryptions) but is not itself an ostensible particular. Yet it is not a conceptual artifact; its attributes and functioning do not depend on intellection. It is concrete but not ostensible.[1]

1 I say "ostensible" rather than "localizable" because specific currencies, such as the dollar or the euro, possess temporally localizable properties (of magnitude or equivalence) even though

Concrete social activity generates abstractions in consciousness. These include: the individual, property, productivity, population, the market, society, nature, nation-state, law, right, et al. They can be contrasted with the critical form-determinations through which Marx diagnoses these thought abstractions as the ideological masks of real abstractions: commodity, money, labour, value, production, exchange, et al. Uncovering the form-determinations of the capitalist totality reveals how a category like 'society' misrepresents this contradictory totality as a concrete whole.

Maintaining the reality of abstractions while anchoring them in social practices, Marx's materialism breaks with traditional metaphysics and epistemology. This break is radical but not absolute: unlike Nietzsche for instance, Marx does not try to dissolve the dialectic of truth and semblance into a play of forces (competing wills to power).[2] It is Feuerbach who gives Marx his lead in breaking with philosophy's speculative consummation in absolute knowing. For Feuerbach, speculative transcendence becomes immanent as the fusion of the sensuous and the supersensuous, the phenomenal and the noumenal: "[W]e need not go beyond sensuousness to arrive, in the sense of the Absolute Philosophy, at the limit of the merely sensuous and empirical; all we have to do is not separate the intellect from the senses in order to find the supersensuous—spirit and reason—within the sensuous."[3] The sensuous fusion of sensuous and supersensuous is realized in human being. The essence of being human is communality and the sensuous root of communality lies in the interpersonal relation (as opposed to Kantian intersubjectivity).[4]

these properties may not be phenomenologically accessible by their users.

2 To the extent that it disregards distinctions between levels of explanation (between the physical and the biological, the biological and the psychological, the psychological and the historical, the historical and the cultural), Nietzsche's invocation of 'forces' in his attempt to overcome both transcendental (Kant) and speculative (Hegel) philosophy ends up miring him in psychologism and biologism. For an illuminating reconstruction of the neo-Kantian context of Nietzsche's naturalism, see Peter Bornedal *Nietzsche's Naturalist Deconstruction of Truth*, Rowman and Littlefield, forthcoming. Marx, by way of contrast, espouses science and affirms the continuity between humanity and nature while rejecting 'worldview' naturalism, i.e. naturalism as a metaphysical ideology. He draws critically on Hegel and Feuerbach to overcome the limitations of both logicism and anthropologism. The logicist equivalence between the real and the rational is subverted by Feuerbach's rooting of spiritual self-externalization in human sociality. But the anthropological equation of sociality with communality is subverted by using the dialectic of essence and appearance to explain how sociality does not appear to itself as it is in itself.

3 Feuerbach 2012, p. 504.

4 Feuerbach 2012: 529.

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Marx takes over Feuerbach's sensuous immanentization of speculative transcendence. However, for Marx, the social relation is irreducible to the interpersonal because it is rooted in social practice, which operates behind the back of consciousness, whether personal or interpersonal. Sensuous practice—what we do without knowing that we are doing it—is the immanent but unconscious medium of human being. Sensuous social practice is not an attribute of human being; human being is an attribute of sensuous social practice.

Attempts to absolutize Marx's break with philosophy end up recoding it philosophically by appealing to false concretions (consciousness, the body), indeterminate abstractions (utopia, redemption), or more often than not, a theological fusion of both. Precisely because it eschews undialectical absoluteness, Marx's break with traditional philosophy can only be properly grasped through the resources of philosophy. It resides in a double inversion: Marx overturns rationalism's subordination of the sensible to the intelligible while simultaneously overturning empiricism's subordination of the intelligible to the sensible. Thus Marx 'twists free' of both rationalism and empiricism by suggesting that it is the sensible that is inapparent and the intelligible that is apparent. The critique of political economy follows from this double inversion, together with Marx's claim that what is concrete in reality can only be grasped through the medium of abstraction. The crux of this double inversion resides in the exchange abstraction and the essential split it generates between the reproduction of value and the reproduction of sociality. While *Capital* develops the ramifications of this inversion, it is already prefigured in the tenets of historical materialism. I will recapitulate them here in the form of ten theses derived from *The German Ideology* and the *Theses on Feuerbach* (this list is not supposed to be definitive; it is intended merely as a useful heuristic):

Ten theses of historical materialism

1. Human social production is the ultimate determinant of ideation.

2. Human activity is determined by existing conditions but also produces new conditions. It is this circuit of conditioned and conditioning activity that is the empirically (as opposed to logically) real starting point for materialist theory. It is concretely sensuous as the medium of practice; it is not an abstract datum or "matter of fact" of the sort favoured by philosophical empiricism.[5]

5 See Feuerbach 2012, pp. 484-486.

3. Forces of production determine social relations but are also determined by them in turn.

4. The development of the division of labour determines (a) the development of forms of property, (b) the contradiction between theory and practice, and (c) the contradiction between particular and common interests.

5. The difference between humans and other animals is materially produced by human activity; it is not a metaphysical or transcendental difference. Humans differentiate themselves from other animals in practice before distinguishing themselves from them in theory.

6. The history of humanity, including the history of humanity's relation to nature, is the history of social (re)production. No sensuous datum is merely given; it has always been socially produced (i.e. mediated by a system of social relations, not a concept).

7. The social relation is the source of the materiality of human consciousness.

8. Consciousness is the "inverted reflection" of real social relations. The limitations of material production and social relations impose this inversion upon consciousness.

9. Historical materialism is the science of history to the extent that it proceeds from the real premise of sensuous productive activity as the source of ideological representation, including that of empiricist and idealist history.

10. Practice establishes the truth, i.e. the effectiveness or actuality, of thinking.

From ideological inversion to fetishistic transposition

I want to begin by considering thesis 8: sensuous productive activity appears inverted in ideation. The limitations of our material activities and social relations impose limits upon our understanding of that activity and these relations. Thus the critique of ideology starts from the critique of the primacy of consciousness. The "historical life-process" (the production and reproduction of the means of existence) makes human social relations appear upside-down in consciousness:

> If the conscious expression of the real relations of these individuals is illusory, if in their imagination they turn reality upside-down, then this in its turn is the result of their limited material mode of activity and their limited social relations arising from it. [...] Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc., that is, real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness [*das Bewusstsein*] can never be anything else than conscious being [*das bewusste Sein*], and the being of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology men and their relations appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.[6]

If ideology (religious, juridical, economic, philosophical, scientific) is the 'inverted image' of social existence, understood as circuit of conditioned and conditioning productive activity, then this inversion cannot be confined to single dimension of representation (e.g. spatial orientation, up-down). Marx's 'inversion' of the metaphysical subordination of sensuous appearance to supersensuous reality does not just re-subordinate the latter to the former. The critical torsion proper to the critique of political economy implies that the sensuous (forces and relations of production) is inapparent and that the intelligible (consciousness as representation of these forces and relations) is apparent, so that the intelligible is the distorted form of appearance of inapparent sensuous activity (the activity constituting productive forces and relations).

In *Capital* however, ideological inversion becomes fetishistic *transposition*. The commodity is the juncture of the sensuous and the supersensuous: it is the form in which sensuous relations between producers appear to the producers themselves as supersensuous relations between their products:

> A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. This is the reason why the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses [....] [But] the existence of the things qua commodities, and the value relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no

6 Marx 1998, p. 42.

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> connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom. There it is a definite social relation between men that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things.[7]

The relation of producers to "the sum total of their own labour" is their relation to the exchange value that relates commodities to each other. As the transposition of social relations among producers into relations between products mediated by the 'spectral objectivity' of value, fetishism is the occlusion of productive social activity in the act of commodity exchange. Consciousness of the individual act of exchange occludes consciousness of its social precondition. Consciousness is necessarily false in the sense that we can only be individually conscious of what we are doing in exchange by *not* being conscious of what we are collectively doing in exchange. The collective practice of commodity exchange is precisely what cannot be intuited or represented from the vantage of individuals engaged in exchange. Exchange is a practical abstraction whose concreteness can only be grasped by abstracting from what appears as concrete from the vantage of individual consciousness. The epistemic index for the primacy of social practice is its misprision in consciousness. Practice is not transparent to its practitioners. Supersensible abstraction (what Marx calls 'form-determination') is the concrete form in which sensuous practice appears to theoretical consciousness, which is the reified and reifying consciousness conditioned by the division of (intellectual and manual) labour.

Two clarifications are necessary at this point. First, Marx's materialism is not soldered to a metaphysics of labour. Labour is not the essence of history because useful work is necessarily misrepresented as valuable labour within a specific historical context.[8] There is no determination of use that does not involve abstracting from the historically specific determination of exchange-value under capitalism.

7 Marx 2000b, p. 473

8 "So far therefore as labour is a creator of use-value, is useful labour, it is a necessary condition, independent of all forms of society for the existence of the human race; it is an eternal nature-imposed necessity, without which there can be no material exchanges between man and Nature, and therefore no life." (Marx 2000b, p.464) Note that while useful labour in general is a transhistorical condition of human life, the specific varieties of useful labour, or what counts as useful labour within a particular society, will be historically variable. Marx does not postulate a set of use-values in-themselves, transcending historically specific social formations. In a capitalist society coordinated around the production and exchange of commodities, the use-values of commodities, i.e. the variety of uses to which they can be put, is shaped in negative by the primacy of exchange-value, which is the first and final cause of their existence.

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Thus there is no use in-itself, no domain of use-values transcending historically specific alignments of production and consumption. Second, Marx is not wedded to a metaphysics of production. Capitalist production is commodity production: the form of production under capital is conditioned by and subordinated to the commodity form. The means of production themselves are composed of commodities. Thus, under capitalism, both production and consumption are subordinated to exchange (to the commodity-form and thereby to value). There is no trans-historical perspective on production, save for what Marx describes as "singling out and fixing" the general features common to historically specific social formations. 'Production in general' is a methodological abstraction, not an ontological category.[9] To hypostatize production and elevate it into a metaphysical principle ("nature is production") is to naturalize a historically specific social category. Since the commodity-form is intrinsic to the categories of 'production' and 'productivity', the logic of production is indissociable from the logic of commodity exchange.[10]

But the practical reality of commodity exchange is not experienced *as* practice within reified consciousness (i.e. the social consciousness subjugated by the commodity form).[11] Thus the reality of collective practical activity can only be indirectly attested to by exposing its symptomatic (fetishistic) misrepresentation both in individual consciousness and the theoretical consciousness that takes its cue from the latter. This is why the critique of political economy is necessary. To grasp the structure of the necessary false consciousness operative in

9 "Whenever we speak, therefore, of production, we always have in mind production at a certain stage of social development, or production by social individuals [...] 'Production in general' is an abstraction, but it is a rational abstraction, in so far as it singles out and fixes the common features, thereby saving us repetition." (Marx 2000a, p.381) Production as methodological abstraction stands in contrast to the hypostatization of production, which often accompanies the naturalization of capitalism. The latter involves a four-step argument, which Marx summarizes as follows: (i) production always requires some instrument of production ("let that instrument be only the hand"); (ii) production is not possible without past accumulated labour ("even if that labour should consist of mere skill which has been accumulated and concentrated in the hand of the savage by repeated exercise"); (iii) capital is ("among other things") both an instrument of production and past impersonal labour; (iv) therefore, "capital is a universal, eternal, natural phenomenon". But this is only true, writes Marx, "if we disregard the specific properties which turn an 'instrument of production' and 'stored up labour' into capital." (Marx 2000a, pp.381-382) These specific properties, unveiled in Marx's analysis, are their status as commodities and their subjection to the valorization process, which is perpetuated by the practice of commodity exchange. But these are social properties, not natural ones.

10 This ontologization of production arguably vitiates Deleuze and Guattari's attempt to align Marx with Spinoza in *Anti-Oedipus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

11 Lukacs's remains the most powerful and sophisticated account of reification: see Lukacs 1972.

misrepresentation is to identify this falsity as the only veritable index of the social relation, understood as a system of impersonal practices, rather than a set of interpersonal relations. The necessity of falsity points to its inapparent truth. Consciousness is necessarily false: it does not *express* the social relation (the system of impersonal practices) that is its essence; it *represses* it.

The concrete-in-thought

Marx's critique begins with the categories of political economy as expressions of socially necessary false consciousness.

These categories are shown to be results of historically specific conditions and relations of production. What critique reveals however is not the truth of the invisible but the untruth of the visible, i.e. the intelligible. What presents itself to thought as concrete is an incomplete abstraction; but through its incompleteness, this abstraction harbors a symptomatic relation to what is really concrete, the social totality. The structure of the latter, however, is precisely what cannot be intuited or inferred. It does not give itself to consciousness. It is ideologically misrepresented as an aggregate of composite abstractions, which critique must first decompose into their elementary parts before recomposing these parts into a conceptual totality that corresponds to the social totality but does not resemble it:

> It seems to be the correct procedure to commence with the real and the concrete, the actual prerequisites. In the case of political economy, to commence with population, which is the basis and the author of the entire productive activity of society. Yet on closer consideration it proves to be wrong. Population is an abstraction, if we leave out for example the classes of which it consists. These classes, again, are but an empty word unless we know what are the elements on which they are based, such as wage-labour, capital, etc. These imply, in their turn, exchange, division of labour, prices, etc. Capital, for example, does not mean anything without wage-labour, value, money, price, etc. If we start out, therefore, with population, we do so with a chaotic conception [*Vorstellung*] of the whole [*Ganzen*], and by closer analysis we will gradually arrive at simpler ideas; thus we shall proceed from the imaginary [*vorgestellten*] concrete to less and less complex abstractions, until we arrive at the simplest determinations. This once attained, we might start on our return journey until we finally came back to population, but this time not as a chaotic notion of an integral whole, but as a rich aggregate [*Totalität*] of many determinations and relations [...] The concrete is concrete because it is a combination [*Zusammengfassung*] of many determinations, i.e. a unity of diverse elements [*Mannigfaltigen*]. In our thought it therefore appears as a process of synthesis, as a result, and not as a starting-point, although it is the actual [*wirkliche*] starting-point and, therefore, also the starting-point of observation [*Anschaung*] and conception [*Vorstellung*]. By the former method the complete conception passes into an abstract definition; by the latter the abstract definitions lead to the reproduction of the concrete subject in the course of reasoning.[12]

Marx's method of critique comprises two steps: first the decomposition of the abstracted (represented) concrete into its elementary components (simple abstractions); then the recombination of simple abstractions into concretely determined abstraction: the totality of determinations as concrete-in-thought. What is *represented* as concrete-in-reality is an indeterminate whole. What is *reproduced* as concrete-in-thought is a determinate totality. The movement from abstract representation to concrete reproduction is logical not material. Thus it is necessary to distinguish ideal movement from the real *act* of production:

> [T]he consciousness for which comprehending thought is what is most real in man, for which the world is only real when comprehended (and philosophical consciousness is of this nature), mistakes the movement of categories for the real act of production (which unfortunately receives only its impetus from outside), whose result is the world; that is true—here we have, however, again a tautology—in so far as the concrete aggregate [*Totalität*], as a thought aggregate [*Gedankentotalität*], the concrete subject of our thought [*Gedankenkonkretum*], is in fact a product of thought, of comprehension; not, however, in the sense of a product of a self-emanating conception which works outside of and stands above observation [*Anschaung*] and imagination [*Vorstellung*], but of a conceptual working-over [*Verarbeitung*] of observation and imagination. The whole [*Ganze*], as it appears in our heads as a thought-aggregate [*Gedankenganze*], is the product of a thinking mind which grasps the world in the only way open to it, a way which differs from the one employed by the artistic, religious, or practical mind. The concrete [*reale*] subject continues to lead an independent

12 Marx 2000a, p.386.

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> existence after it has been grasped, as it did before, outside the head, so long as the head contemplates it only speculatively, theoretically. So that in the employment of the theoretical method in political economy, the subject, society, must constantly be kept in mind as the premise from which we start.[13]

The difference between the real (social) subject and the thought aggregate (e.g. society), or between what is really concrete and what is concrete-in-thought, is not a difference in thought. But here an obvious rejoinder presents itself: How are we to distinguish between concrete and abstract in thought, and concrete and abstract in reality, without invoking either a metaphysical or empirical difference between thought and reality? Can Marx maintain this methodological distinction without unwittingly reiterating philosophical dualisms (between thought and reality, concept and thing, ideal and real) that have already been dialectically superseded in Hegel's idealism? The distinction between real subject and thought-aggregate cannot be empirically attested to: we cannot *point* to the real subject because the social totality is not an empirical datum. Nor is it accessible from Feuerbach's "absolute standpoint", which is that of the interpersonal relation between 'I' and 'You': Marx's real subject is a locus of impersonal practices irreducible to the interpersonal relation.[14] Conversely, to insist that the difference can be substantiated from a purely rational vantage point is to readopt the contemplative stance whose separation of thought and being, or mind and matter, reflects the division of labour and the separation of theory and practice.

I want to suggest that the right way to grasp Marx's distinction between concrete-in-thought and concrete-in-reality is neither as a conceptual difference nor as an empirical difference but as a *difference-in-act*. What is concrete-in-reality is the totality of impersonal social practices and these practices constitute a system of actual differences that cannot be ratified at the level of consciousness or experience. Thus the fundamental difference, from which the critique of political economy proceeds, is verified in social practice, rather than in experience or thought. Recall the tenth thesis of historical materialism stated above: the truth, i.e., the effectiveness or actuality (*wirklichkeit*) of thinking, is established in practice. My claim is that for Marx, the actuality of

13 Marx 2000a, p.387

14 "The natural standpoint of man, the standpoint of the distinction between 'I' and 'You', between subject and object is the true, the absolute standpoint and, hence, also the standpoint of philosophy." Feuerbach 2012, p. 528.

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practice verifies that of thought without there being a metaphysical correspondence between the actuality of thought and the actuality of practice. Indeed, Marx's point is that while thought can adequately represent the structure of practice, there is no similarity or resemblance between the structure of thought (what is concrete-in-thought) and that of practice (concrete-in-reality). What is concrete-in-reality is a practical act whose nature does not reveal itself either to those executing it or to the theoretical consciousness that takes the consciousness of practitioners as its starting point.

Using and exchanging

Sohn-Rethel roots Marx's distinction between use-value and exchange-value in the socially instituted distinction between the act of using and the act of exchanging. But this social distinction also has an ontological basis:

> The point is that use and exchange are not only different and contrasting by description, but are mutually exclusive in time. They must take place separately at different times. This is because exchange serves only a change of ownership, a change, that is, in terms of a purely social status of the commodities as owned property. In order to make this change possible on a basis of negotiated agreement the physical condition of the commodities, their material status, must remain unchanged, or at any rate must be assumed to remain unchanged. Commodity exchange cannot take place as a recognised social institution unless this separation of exchange from use is stringently observed. [...] Thus the salient feature of the act of exchange is that its separation from use has assumed the compelling necessity of an objective social law. Wherever commodity exchange takes place it does so in effective 'abstraction' from use. This is an abstraction not in mind, but in fact. It is a state of affairs prevailing at a definite place and-lasting a definite time. It is the state of affairs which reigns on the market.[15]

Commodity exchange separates use from value: this is the source of real abstraction. Use is determined by qualitative particularity, exchange by quantitative homogeneity. Using and exchanging are concrete social acts. For Sohn-Rethel, it is their spatiotemporal disjunction (the fact that one cannot exchange what one is using or use what one is exchanging)

15 Sohn-Rethel 1978, pp. 24-25.

that makes abstraction a concrete act. However, the act of exchange presupposes the actuality of the commodity-form: every exchange is an exchange of commodities (buying and selling). But exchange cannot generate commodification if commodification is the condition of exchange (i.e the commodification of labour as wage-labour). Thus the reality of the exchange abstraction implies a difference between exchange-in-act (the actuality of exchange) and the act of exchange. The concrete act generative of abstraction cannot presuppose its actuality. The sociality of the act of exchange is distinct from the actuality of commodification. But sociality is the totality of relations joining productive forces and relations (otherwise it is a metaphysical abstraction). Since the production process presupposes commodification and commodification (the exchange-abstraction) presupposes un-commodified social activity, we face the following dilemma: either try to give a positive account of non-commodified sociality, i.e. of the social relation, at the risk of relapsing into an ultimately ideological metaphysics of sociality (reiterating Feuerbach's conflation of sociality and communality); or we insist that we cannot determine the social relation other than as the negation of commodified sociality. The latter option implies that the un-commodified root of commodified sociality cannot be positively characterised as social.

Labour and valorization

The difference between exchange as act and exchange as actuality underlies the distinction between concrete and abstract labour. The labour that enters into the composition of value has already had its qualitative particularity expunged from it through the act of exchange: "[W]henever, by an exchange, we equate as values our different products, by that very act, we also equate, as human labour, the different kinds of labour expended upon them. *We are not aware of this, nevertheless we do it*. Value, therefore, does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic."[16]

By inscribing itself into the body of every commodity, the 'spectral objectivity' of value converts every product into a cipher whose sensuous structure is blotted out by its supersensuous signification. But the process in which value acquires substance and inscribes itself into the commodity is also the process in which labour is transubstantiated into value. This is the process in which concretely differentiated human

16 Marx 2000b, p. 474 (my italics).

labour is rendered into what Marx describes as an undifferentiated "*bloße Gallerte*", a 'gelatinous mass'.[17] Yet this rendering process, the reduction of concretely differentiated labour into undifferentiated abstract labour, is already governed by value. Thus value oversees its own substantialization: it perpetually regenerates itself by ensuring that the substrate from which it draws substance, labour, has 'always already' been rendered homogenous with it. This is carried out through what Michael Heinrich calls a "threefold reduction": of individually expended labor-time to average socially necessary labor-time; of individual productivity to socially average productivity correlated with monetary social demand; of differences in kinds and degrees of skill to a socially average type and degree of skill.[18] Thus the abstraction of labour is its social *validation* as value-constituting labour. Abstract labour is both socially valorized and *valorizing* insofar as it has already been appropriated by what Marx calls "self-sufficient value":[19] its "valorizing activity" is carried out on behalf of self-valorizing value.

However, Marx insists, "the value of labour-power and the value which that labour-power creates in the production process, are two entirely different magnitudes."[20] As with every other commodity, the value of labour-power is measured by the socially necessary time required to reproduce it. But in reproducing itself, labour-power creates value in excess of itself, i.e., a value greater than the value of labour-power as measured by the time required for its reproduction. This is what Marx calls 'surplus-value'. Surplus-value is a function of the discrepancy between the value of unexpended labour-power, a value measured by the time required to reconstitute an equivalent of this unexpended potential, and the value generated by its expenditure, which is greater than that of its unexpended state. This appeal to the metaphysical distinction between potentiality and actuality should not be taken to entail the ontologization of labour-power; rather, it follows from its social status as a commodity. The distinction between potential and actualized labour-power is internal to commodified labour; it is decreed by capitalism's metaphysics of value. But it does not map onto the distinction between abstract and concrete labour. The actualization of labour-power, i.e. the consumption of its use-value in the capitalist production process, generates

17 For an insightful discussion of the significance of the expression "*bloße Gallerte*" see Sutherland 2010.

18 See Heinrich 2012, pp.100-102

19 See Marx 2000a, p.409

20 Marx 2000b, p.504

exchange-values in excess of the exchange-value of labour-power. As Peter Thomas points out, this is a consequence of labour-power's exceptional status as the commodity whose use-value is generative of the exchange-value of all other commodities: "labour-power is the only commodity that is not exhausted in the consumption of its particular use-value following exchange. On the contrary, the consumption of the use-value of labour-power has the potential to give the capitalist more exchange-values than the seller of labour-power, the worker, received."[21] But note that the consumption of labour-power is only *potentially* productive of exchange-values greater than its own. This is because, as Thomas observes, although it is exchanged as abstract labour-power, it is consumed as concrete labour. The capitalist's consumption of this concrete labour generates another magnitude of potential abstract value; but its realization as a surplus depends on additional factors exceeding those of production per se (e.g. social demand, the market, etc). More importantly, the difference between the exchange and consumption of labour-power (which corresponds to the difference between abstract and concrete labour) does not unfold in the same dimension as the difference between its potentiality and its actuality. The first difference transects the second but does not overlap with it. While the difference between the actuality and potentiality of labour-power is internal to the exchange abstraction, the difference between exchanging and consuming labour-power bridges the spheres of exchange and use, which is to say, between the abstract and the concrete. This is why Thomas describes labour-power as a "vanishing mediator" between the spheres of circulation and production.[22] However, it is not labour-power qua commodity that plays this mediating role between the spheres of circulation and production, since the commodity-form already presupposes the constitution of the difference between these two spheres, or the difference between exchange and use. Thus the actuality of the exchange abstraction (within which the difference between potential and actual labour-power obtains) is constituted by a concrete act that also establishes the difference between exchanging and using, or circulation and production. The vanishing mediator here is not labour-power but the unvalidated act through which labour is abstracted into its socially validated, value-constituting role.

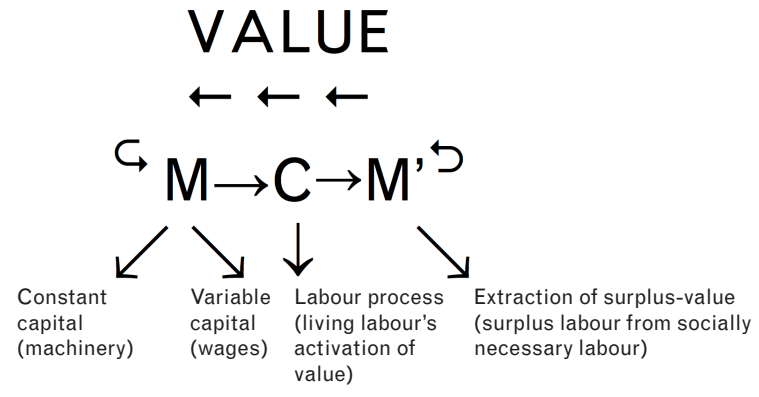
Value is measured abstractly (through abstract labour time) but realized concretely (through concrete labour time). Thus surplus-value

21 Thomas 2010, p.51

22 Thomas 2010, p.52

is a function not only of the difference between the potential and actual expenditure of labour-power, but also of the inequality between the value of labour as measured by the abstract time required to reproduce it, and the value of the products generated through its reproduction when measured by the same yardstick. Whether absolute and obtained by the extensive increase of expended labour-power (lengthening the working day) or relative and obtained through its intensive increase (increasing productivity without lengthening the working day), surplus-value is generated by the unvalorized surplus labour required for labour's self-reproduction. Thus capital extracts surplus-value from labour-power's activation of the value embodied in both constant and variable capital (a value which is itself nothing but a sum of objectified or 'congealed' labour-power). Potential surplus-value is realized as profit with the sale of the products of labour-power and then reinvested in production. In the diagram below, the valorization process proceeds from money (M, representing constant and variable capital), to commodities (C, representing living labour's activation of the value embodied in constant and variable capital), to a greater quantity of money generated through the extraction of surplus-value from living labour's activation of the initial sum of value (M', surplus-value):

Capital as self-valorizing value



In reproducing itself, living labour creates the 'spectral objectivity' of value, to which it is re-subordinated in turn as commodified wage-labour, i.e. socially validated labour. But the difference between commodified and un-commodified labour is neither metaphysical nor sociological: it is the formal difference between socially validated exchange and the unvalidated act of exchange.

Dissociative sociality

In a society where all social validation is governed by exchange, Tony Smith suggests that the actuality of the social relation is necessarily dissociative. Following Smith, I want to argue that since, under capitalism, the social component of dissociation is governed by exchange (commodification), the practical source of commodification (the act of exchange) is necessarily asocial. This is to say that socially validated labour is conditioned by un-validated practical activity. This entails a split between the essence of sociality and the essence of value, i.e. capital. Smith formulates this split as follows:

> Generalised commodity-production must be conceptualised as a set of relationships among things (commodities and money), with value reigning as the 'essence' of these relationships. The underlying truth of this essence (abstract, homogeneous and quantitative value) is adequately manifested in its form of appearance (abstract, homogeneous and quantitative money).[23]

On Smith's account, commodity exchange is the alien form of sociality in the historically specific mode of dissociated sociality. Sociality is the 'essence' of the totality of productive forces and relations. But this essence can only manifest itself as its own untruth (as capitalist 'society'). Dissociative sociality entails that social relations cannot appear as what they essentially are:

> The social ontology of generalised commodity-production is defined by two completely incommensurable Essence-Logics in Hegel's sense of the term. On the one hand, value is the essence commodities must possess to play a role in social reproduction. This essence adequately appears in the form of the money that validates the production of those commodities. But the value of commodities is a reflection of the form taken by human sociality in our epoch, and the money that manifests value is nothing but the fetishized appearance of this quite different sort of essence. Each essence-claim is incompatible with the other; neither can be reduced to or explained away by the other.[24]

This bifurcation in the essence of the social totality follows from capital's being a "contradiction in act": it is compelled to reduce labour time to a minimum while maintaining it as the sole measure of value. Socially necessary labour time is decreased in order to increase surplus labour time, thereby turning surplus labour time into the condition for necessary labour time. Capital's self-reproduction, i.e. its infinite expansion as self-valorizing value, generates the internal obstacle to its reproduction, i.e. the immanent limit to its infinite expansion.[25] Thus, as Endnotes put it, capital is split between its "constant return to itself as true infinity, and its incessant driving beyond itself as false or spurious infinity."[26]

This scission in the capitalist totality, its 'contradiction-in-act', generates the split between the reproductive cycles of capital and of labour-power. Capital reproduces itself through the valorization process, in which necessary labour is constantly diminished to maximize surplus labour and hence surplus-value. At the same time, labour-power reproduces itself by valorizing capital, but in doing so increases surplus labour, making necessary labour ever more dependent upon it. Thus the activation of value in the valorization process depends not on the abstract difference between potential and actual labour-power but on the concrete actuality of the disjunct between (un-commodified, valueless) practice and (commodified, valuable) activity. Interpreted in this way, Marx's contrast between 'living' and 'dead' labour is shorn of its Romantic, vitalist overtones. Adopting Marx's terminology, we could say that it is labour-power as commodity that is subsumed by capital, not living labour as such. But the capitalist class relation compels living labour to commodify (i.e. sell) itself in order to reproduce itself, thereby also reproducing capital:

> Proletariat and capital stand in a relation of reciprocal implication with each other: each pole reproduces the other, such that the relation between the two is self-reproducing. The relation is asymmetric, however, in that it is capital which subsumes the labour of proletarians.[27]

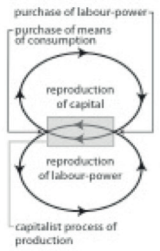
23 Smith 2009, p. 31.

24 Tony Smith 2009, p. 32

25 "Capital is itself contradiction in act, since it makes an effort to reduce labour time to the minimum, while at the same time establishing labour time as the sole measurement and source of wealth. Thus it diminishes labour time in its necessary form, in order to increase its surplus form; therefore it increasingly establishes surplus labour time as a condition (a question of life and death) for necessary labour time." (Marx 2000a, p.415, translation modified)

26 Endnotes 2010

27 Endnotes 2010



Labour-power's purchase of the means of consumption it requires to reproduce itself fuels capital's purchase of labour-power in capital's self-reproduction. The exchange of labour-power for wages (C→M) initiates the reproduction of labour-power; the exchange of wages for commodities (M→C) completes it. At the same time, but at the opposite pole of the class relation, the capitalist's purchase of labour-power (M→C) is the exchange that initiates the valorization process, while the sale of the commodities embodying the surplus-value extracted from labour-power (C→M') is the exchange that completes it. Both reproductive cycles (of labour-power and capital) are mediated by exchange. Yet exchange cannot be realized without the intervention of valueless activity, which capital requires to activate value, i.e., to convert the magnitude of actual value embodied in fixed and constant capital into a potential surplus.

Conclusion

Reification is the fetishization of social relations: the transposition of relations between producers into relations between products. But Marx's critique of reification is epistemological not ontological. The distinction between 'living' (objectivating) and 'dead' (objectified) labour is not a metaphysical contrast between authentic and inauthentic existence or between lived and represented experience. It is a formal contrast between unconscious (unvalidated) practice and conscious (socially validated) activity. Nevertheless, the contrast has an ontological premise: the actuality of exchange depends upon an act that is not actually exchanged (valorized). This unconscious practice is essentially or veridically human precisely in the sense that, under capitalism, our socially validated humanity (as persons) is necessarily dissociative. The question is whether knowing this, and the necessary worthlessness of continuing to reproduce ourselves under the capital relation, provides any clue about determining the negation of this contradiction between what we do and what we are.

28 This diagram is taken from Endnotes 2008. I would like to thank Endnotes for letting me use it.

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