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Materialist Epistemontology: Sohn-Rethel with Marx and Spinoza

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Abstract

Sohn-Rethel's theory undermines the line of thought that, from Kant to deconstruction, severs being or the thing from representation, by showing that the Kantian a priori categories of thought (representation) are a posteriori effects of the relations of things (being), to the point that it is 'only through the language of commodities that their owners become rational beings'. This is the thesis of Marx's theory of 'commodity fetishism', and Sohn-Rethel's work develops the methodology that follows from it. '*Realabstraktion*' means that the commodification of things amounts to their transformation into the language that provides the a priori categories of human thought. As a result, far from being inaccessible to representation, being is precisely that which reveals itself whenever the transcendental categories of representation are laid out. Therefore, Sohn-Rethel's theory entails that not only can one not separate economy from thought but also economy and thought from being, so that there are no three distinct fields – economy, ontology and epistemology – but one: an economic epistemontology. Just as Marx's 'commodity fetishism' introduced the unconscious in both subjectivity and economy – 'they do this without knowing it' – Sohn-Rethel analysed all economic, intellectual and practical spheres in terms of the fundamental distinction between consciousness and the unconscious. The article also points to certain corrections that Marx's own theory indicates need to be made in Sohn-Rethel's account, particularly regarding the source of abstraction, the role of coined money, and the difference between capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production and exchange.

Keywords

commodity fetishism, labor-power, money, monism, real abstraction

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Introduction: Two lines of secular epistemology

Alfred Sohn-Rethel's lifelong aspiration to produce a materialist epistemology that would intertwine Immanuel Kant's critique of pure reason with Karl Marx's critique of political economy, so as to derive the Kantian a priori categories of apperception from Marx's analysis of the historical, hence *a posteriori*, reality of capitalism, targets the ultimate question of any epistemology: what is the relation between thought – language, representation, phenomenon – and external reality: social reality, nature, things, being, and even spirit or idea insofar as the latter is considered as an absolute, beyond and above the ways people represent it.

The philosophical responses to this question during capitalist modernity are split into two major directions: dualism and monism. Since the 17th century the former has increasingly become the dominant position, to the point that for Michel Foucault the epistemology of secular modernity is defined as a development in which 'things and words were to be separated' (1970: 42–3). In the Enlightenment, this separation was sealed by Immanuel Kant's severance of the thing-in-itself from its appearance (the way the thing appears to consciousness through the latter's universal a priori categories). The path was paved for words to become '*arbitrary* and *differential*,' as would the symbolic values (i.e., exchange-values) of material worth (Ferdinand de Saussure, 1966: 118; see also Foucault, 1970: 174–80). In postmodernism, this dualism culminated in the deconstructionist declaration that 'there is no outside-text' (Derrida, 1976: 158), or that language has no 'extralinguistic referent or meaning' but rather concerns 'intralinguistic resources of figures' (de Man, 1979: 105).

By contrast, for monism words are the expression of things or reality. Baruch Spinoza, to whom we shall return, is the first modern representative of the position that thought adequately expresses the object that it thinks. This means that even the constructedness and deconstructibility of truths can only mean that similar effects occur in being. In Walter Benjamin's idiom, the 'fallenness' of words expresses that being (or the absolute) is fallen, that is, that it, too, is 'enfolded into a material history strewn with … transient ideas' (Hansen, 2004: 675). It is this equal immersion of thought and being in material history that Alfred Sohn-Rethel envisions in his project toward a materialist epistemology or – since here thought adequately expresses being – epistemontology.

Sohn-Rethel's path toward this end passes through Karl Marx, not G. W. F. Hegel – in whom Sohn-Rethel saw the epitome of idealism – that is, not through dialectical dualism, which claims to unify thought and being but only by first opposing them and then trying to synthesize them, in a process in which what remains at the end is 'the duplication of self-consciousness' (Hegel, 1977: 110; § 176) – that is, pure (and self-mirrored) thought, with no being. Instead, Sohn-Rethel's lead is offered by Marx's theory of commodity fetishism and his monistic ontology.

For Marx being consists of two aspects: on the one hand, extension or materiality (use-value), subject to decay in linear time and continuous space, and, on the other hand, immateriality or abstraction from materiality (abstract value), whose spatiotemporal categories are those of synchronic differential relations among places devoid of material content (as later formulated by structuralism).[1] But because secular humans imagine that things pertain only to the material aspect, Marx's ontology entails that

thought – traditionally juxtaposed to things and understood as consciousness – becomes split between consciousness and the unconscious. In capitalism, 'men do not bring the products of their labour into relation with each other as values', having recognized 'these objects merely as the material integuments of homogeneous human labour' (Marx, 1990[1867]: 166); in exchanging these objects we treat them as concrete objects of utility, produced by different kinds of labor, even as in truth they become exchangeable values precisely because they are the material receptacles of homogeneous labor. So, even though we actually exchange abstract values, we 'do this without being aware of it' – we do it unconsciously (ibid.: 166–7). If we are unable to know what we actually do, then our consciousness must be limited to considering things in their materiality, and not as abstract values. Therefore, our consciousness operates according to the categories of extension (use-value), so that only our unconscious is capable of registering the fact that we are exchanging abstract values – something that can be *known* only from the perspective of the exchanged values themselves, the commodities abstracted from their materiality. In Marx's words: 'If commodities could speak, they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects ... is our value ... We relate to each other merely as exchange-values (ibid.: 176–7). The language of values, things abstracted from materiality, is the language of our unconscious, and its spatio-temporality is also abstracted in the form of synchronic differentiality. Hence, *monist ontology* entails both a *monist theory of temporality* (being exists both in diachrony and synchrony) and a *monist epistemology* (thought is split between diachronic consciousness and the synchronic unconscious).

Sohn-Rethel's work endeavors to formulate systematically an ensuing materialist epistemontology and its corresponding theory of temporality.

I Real abstraction, and intellectual and manual labor

Taking as his starting point Marx's ontology, Sohn-Rethel approaches being as consisting of two equally real aspects: the material world of use-value and the abstract/formal world of exchange-value. As opposed to the material objects of utility, the 'form of commodity is abstract and abstractness governs its whole orbit'; it is 'exchange-value', which, 'in contrast to the use-value of commodities ... is subject only to quantitative differentiation' (Sohn-Rethel, 1978[1970]: 19).[2] Citing Marx: 'Not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values; in this it is the direct opposite of the coarsely sensuous objectivity of commodities as physical bodies' (ibid.: 27; Marx, 1990[1867]: 138). '[E]ven labour', whether intellectual or manual, 'when determining the magnitude and substance of value, becomes "abstract human labour", human labour purely as such' (Sohn-Rethel, 1978[1970]: 19). And money, the 'form in which commodity-value takes on its concrete appearance ... be it as coinage or bank-notes', which as such is a material thing, loses by dint of the fact that it functions as exchange-value – the exchange-value *par* excellence – all its materiality, and 'is an abstract thing' (ibid.: 19). And, finally, 'as owner of such riches, man himself becomes an abstract man, a private property-owner' (ibid.). In short, 'a society in which commodity exchange forms the *nexus rerum* is a purely abstract set of relations', not unlike a structural system (ibid.). By contrast, any activity in which the commodity reassumes its materiality

belongs exclusively in the world of material extension, which is why '"use" designates here the productive and consumptive realms, that is, the entirety of the metabolic interaction of humans with nature, in Marx's sense', as opposed to the 'abstract', which 'excludes all traits of any [such] possible use of commodities' (ibid.: 18). This means that the 'abstract' and the 'material' are determined not by the chemical consistency of a given thing but contextually: within utility (production/consumption) everything is material; within exchange everything is abstracted from materiality and its spatiotemporal determinations, and exists only as pure value. A pound of iron or 10 MB of information are equally material within the realm of utility, and equally immaterial in the circulation of exchange. Both Marx and Sohn-Rethel establish, therefore, a distinction between a 'primary or elementary Nature' (the world of utility) and a 'second ... Nature' (abstract value), the latter of which 'arises out of ... socialization following the removal of all activities relating to man's material metabolic interactions with nature' which 'are themselves part of primary Nature' (Sohn-Rethel, 1989[1970]: 58). The second nature 'is devoid of all sense reality' (Sohn-Rethel, 1978[1970]: 57), it is the universe that 'constitutes Marx's so-called "value objectivity"', and, as such, exists 'outside of or beyond the sphere of natural matter and empirical perception' and its continuous spatio-temporality (Sohen-Rethel, 1989[1970]: 61). The second nature emerges out of the abstraction of the primary nature (material nature or sense reality), and consists of purely quantitative immaterial values and their social (i.e. differential) relations. For both Marx and Sohn-Rethel, terms such as 'social' and 'socialization' or 'interpersonal' are the antipode of inherent natural qualities and the world of use[3] – in the same way structural linguistics uses the terms 'relational' and 'differential', that is, as designating the way in which void elements in a system obtain positive values only through their synchronic differential ('social') relations to the other elements in the same system.

Sohn-Rethel stresses that this abstraction of nature in capitalist economy is real: 'While the concepts of natural science are thought abstractions, the economic concept of value is a real one', for 'commodity abstraction ... does not originate in men's minds but in their actions' in 'the spatio-temporal sphere of human interrelations'; and this fact 'does not give "abstraction" a merely metaphorical meaning' but a 'literal sense' (Sohn-Rethel, 1978[1970]: 20). Modern subjectivity is split between conscious person and unconscious action: 'In commodity exchange the action and the consciousness of people go separate ways. Only the action [of the exchange] is abstract[ed from use] – [*Nur die Handlung des Austauschs ist abstrakt vom Gebrauch*] – the consciousness of the actors is not' (ibid.: 30). This split is replicated in the distinction between 'social' and 'private': 'Only the act of exchange is social, whereas the consciousness of the actors is private and blind to the social-synthetic character of their behavior' (Sohn-Rethel, 1989[1970]: 58). While *I* (consciously) purchase an apple in order to eat (metabolize) it, *we* (unconsciously) enact an exchange of abstract values. This is the meaning of Marx's statement that, to repeat, '[t]hey do this without being aware of it' (Sohn-Rethel, 1978[1970]: 20). The state of being as abstract value is inaccessible to the consciousness of the very persons whose acts bring it about. In other words, primary nature (use, or the metabolic interaction with nature, and its linear temporality) enters the domain of social exchange, in the form of individual consciousness, at the same time as our collective unconscious—our manual

(unconscious and abstractifying) acts of exchange – engages in the secondary nature (abstract value, and its synchronic differentiality). In short, *the split between consciousness and the unconscious occurs within the realm of exchange itself*.

Echoing the title of his major work, Sohn-Rethel famously arrives at the conclusion that 'the fallacies of the epistemological and idealistic tradition are more effectively eliminated if one does not talk of "the theory of knowledge" but the division of mental and manual labour instead' (Sohn-Rethel, 1978[1970]: 21). This thesis has largely been received as referring to the division of labor between intellectual and manual activities *within the realm of production*. Yet, as we have seen, what Sohn-Rethel has presented throughout his exposition of real abstraction is a split *within the realm of exchange*: that between the labor of the hands and that of consciousness (the intellectual labor of the persons, which remains unconscious of the labor of their own hands). The cornerstone of Sohn-Rethel's materialist epistemology consists in the division – and in establishing the relation – between *unconscious manual labor* and *conscious intellectual labor within* the *sphere of exchange*. It is for this reason that Sohn-Rethel made exchange, not production, the ultimate horizon of analysis. His thesis is that abstract thought is constituted through unconscious actions within the realm of exchange, and that, consequently, idealist epistemology must be replaced by a *theory of collective consciousness (intellectual labor) and the collective unconscious (manual labor)*.

The canonical misreading of Sohn-Rethel's distinction between manual and intellectual labor as one referring to two types of labor within the process of production misses one of the most important contributions of both Marx's and Sohn-Rethel's works, namely: the fundamental function of the unconscious in secular capitalist modernity, both on the socio-economical and the subjective levels.[4] *The unconscious emerges within the sphere of capitalist exchange, as a structural system of differential relations of value, which provides the blueprint of the categories of abstract thought*.

In fact, Sohn-Rethel explicitly subscribes to the division of labor within production, which is a non-essential and purely contingent relation to capitalist domination. Although it would seem, he writes, that 'the division between head and hand' within production, or 'the division between scientific intellectual labor and proletarian manual labor', 'has an importance for bourgeois class rule as vital as that of the private ownership of the means of production … [i]t is only too evident in many of the socialist countries today that one can abolish property rights and still not be rid of class' (Sohn-Rethel, 1989[1970]: 7 and 37). Therefore, 'the connection' between class antagonism and the division of labor within production 'is purely causal and historical'; the two 'are conceptually utterly disparate, that is, there exist no interconnections between them that suggest, either in whole or in part, that one necessarily implies the other' (ibid.: 31).

Sohn-Rethel's distinction between head and hand (consciousness and the unconscious) within the sphere of exchange has as little to do with the division of labor within production as Marx's distinction material–immaterial has to do with chemistry. To exemplify this, let us read the following passage referring to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*:

> When analysis concerns itself exclusively with the concepts of intellectual labor in 'pure mathematics' and 'pure natural science' … and generally with their pure possibility and

> method, then it is clear that something is left out, namely: manual labor. Manual labor makes those things of which theoretical reason considers only the 'appearance', so that its reality-character is too alien to become an object of cognition. (Sohn-Rethel, 1989[1970]: 1–2)

It would be inconsistent to read 'manual labor' in this passage as referring to the proletarian domain of production. For, according to both Kant and Sohn-Rethel, theoretical or pure reason [*Vernunft*] relegates to the realm of phenomena (which is the realm of understanding – *Verstand*) also intellectual judgements, as long as they are based on empirical experience in time and space. Phenomena, which are always perceived in time and space, are the objects of understanding, and, hence, any concrete particular experience, intellectual or manual, is a phenomenon and an object of understanding, not a cognitive object of theoretical reason. By contrast, the cognitive object of pure reason concerns the 'absolute totality of all experience [which] is itself not experience' and, hence, not in time and space (Kant, 1977: 70; § 40). What is presupposed for the shift from the phenomenon to the cognitive object of theoretical reason is not intellectual labor but the turn of focus from a particular experience (intellectual or manual) to the *totality* of such an experience. This is what Sohn-Rethel attempts to do, shifting his focus onto the totality of the experience of *all* cognition, including that which Kant's theoretical reason leaves outside because it considers 'its reality-character [to be] too alien to become an object of cognition' – namely the unconscious, the knowledge unconsciously produced and performed by the people's acts in the field of socio-economic effectivity. There is no room for things made by the hand in Kant because in his scheme there is no room for the unconscious. Introducing manual labor as the unconscious is a necessary step for Sohn-Rethel in order to advance the thesis that abstract thought (Kant's a priori) is an effect of empirical reality (Kant's a posteriori). This does not mean – as naïve materialism would want it – that there is no a priori, but that the a priori is produced by the a posteriori as its own unconscious precondition. This is why the questions of historical materialism remain those of idealism:

> How is pure mathematics possible? How is natural science possible? How are synthetic a priori judgments possible? . . . *That* 'pure natural science' is possible is indubitable; it is a fact. Accordingly, we must be able to show *how* it is possible. This was Kant's approach, and this remains the postulate of historical materialism. (Sohn-Rethel, 1989[1970]: 7)

Yet Sohn-Rethel's responses to these same questions break with idealism, as they can be formulated only after having inserted the division between 'hand' and 'head' within the 'head' itself.

II The capitalist mutual abstractification of productive labor and value

Now, even as Sohn-Rethel rightly persists in that the hand–head division is an internal one within thought and exchange, he is wrong in assuming, contrary to Marx, that the genesis of real abstraction occurs exclusively within exchange and not in production:

> Commodity abstraction bears no inherent connection to the labor required for the production of commodities … Commodity abstraction is exchange abstraction, not labor abstraction. The abstraction of labor, which indeed takes place in the capitalist commodity production … occurs in the process of production, not in the process of exchange. (Sohn-Rethel, 1989[1970]: 49)

This is also why only the 'value-creating labour is termed "'abstract human labour"', in contrast to 'concrete labour, which creates use-values' (Sohn-Rethel, 1978[1970]: 22), in spite of its possible abstraction (routinization, etc.) within the capitalist mode of production (e.g. its mechanization in the 'mindless assembly line' or its 'abstractification' resulting from computerization; see Reitter [2007] and Benz-Overhage [1982]). The exclusivity of exchange as the source of abstraction (partly) explains Sohn-Rethel's concentration on (coined) money – 'it is only with coined money that real abstraction can emerge' (Sohn-Rethel, 1989[1970]: 59) – and his thesis that 'the critique of epistemology must be undertaken independently from that of political economy' (Sohn-Rethel, 1978[1970]: 37) – the latter referring exclusively to the analysis of production.

Marx surpasses Sohn-Rethel in recognizing the replication of the split in exchange (thought) within production (realm of matter) itself. While for Sohn-Rethel only the exchange of commodities qua values confers on labor its abstract character retroactively, for Marx labor embodied in its product is abstracted already within capitalist production. Both Marx and Sohn-Rethel concur that:

> Labor is neither inherently abstract, nor is its abstraction to 'abstract human labor' its own work. Labor does not abstractify itself. The site of its abstraction lies outside of labor, in the specific social form of the exchange relation. (Sohn-Rethel, 1989[1970]: 16)

What Sohn-Rethel objects to is that 'the inverse also holds for Marx, that the exchange relation does not abstractify itself either. It is abstracted, or rather, abstractified by labor', so that the 'result of this relation is the commodity value' (1989[1970]: 16). While Sohn-Rethel maintains that only the abstractification of labor is the effect of abstract and abstractifying value, Marx maintains that *also* the value of the commodity is the effect of an already abstract and abstractifying labor. This to Sohn-Rethel means that, for Marx, 'commodity value has the abstractifying exchange relation as its form' for a concrete historical epoch, but 'abstractified labor as its substance' (ibid.: 16) – that is, that the abstraction of labor is a transhistorical immutable fact and not the result of the specific form of capitalist exchange. Such an argument would be politically dubious, for, so Sohn-Rethel reckons, if labor is transhistorically abstract, then one would end up raising social exploitation to a universal and transhistorical principle. Sohn-Rethel interprets the fact that Marx sees a continuum between 'primitive bartering' and contemporary exchange (ibid.: 179) – in that 'human labor is always conceived as "*social* labor", today as throughout all prehistory' (ibid.: 178; emphasis added) – as meaning that for Marx labor has always been abstract. Thus, he infers that 'Marx makes no fundamental distinction between exchange, as it could (!) have occurred prior to exploitation and the mode of exchange that resulted from exploitation', and that Marx sees 'objectification' as having been historically 'seamlessly derived from primordial relations' (ibid.: 179). In

order to de-naturalize capitalist objectification and exploitation, Sohn-Rethel turns to coined money as a breaking point that for the first time in history realizes abstraction. Yet, *Capital* makes clear that for Marx money does not amount to abstract value as a formal system. He indeed concurs with Aristotle that some form of value existed since the most primitive societies, since exchange owes to the natural state of 'men having too much of this and not enough of that' (Aristotle, *The Politics* 1257a5). But Marx also stresses that what is exchanged at that stage is quantities of use-value, and one can speak only of the value of material things, not of a value independent from its material substratum:

> In the direct exchange of products, each commodity is a direct means of exchange to its owner, and an equivalent to those who do not possess it, although only in so far as it has use-value for them. At this stage, therefore, the articles exchanged do not acquire a value-form independent of their own use-value, or of the individual needs of the exchangers. (1990[1867]: 182)

This is so even when coined money mediates in the exchange of these use-values, as Aristotle already knew: to say '5 beds = 1 house' is indistinguishable from '5 beds = a certain amount of money'. What puzzled Aristotle was the fact that '[t]here can be no exchange . . . without equality, and no equality without commensurability', and, hence, 'that the house should be qualitatively equated with the bed' or with coined money. From this he could only conclude that, 'being distinct to the senses . . . it is . . . in reality, impossible . . . that such unlike things can be commensurable', therefore, 'this form of equation can only be . . . a makeshift for practical purposes' (ibid.: 151; citing Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, bk V, ch. 5). Aristotle is unable to infer that there is a 'homogeneous element' or 'common substance' shared by all material things, including coined money, and that this is value qua abstract human labor, because it is only in 'the form of commodity-values' that 'all labour is expressed as equal human labour and therefore as labour of equal quality' (ibid.: 152). In spite of all the coins around him, Aristotle could not discover real abstraction due to 'the historical limitations inherent in the society in which he lived', namely, a 'society . . . founded on the labour of slaves . . . [and] the inequality of men and their labour-powers'; for 'the equality and equivalence of all kinds of labour' presupposes that 'the dominant social relation is the relation between men as possessors of commodities', and, in this sense, as equal (ibid.: 151–2). In other words, what eludes Sohn-Rethel is that Marx argues that labor is *abstracted already within production* only under the precondition that the labor in question is *waged* labor, *commodified* labor – something that already presupposes the existence of the capitalist mode of exchange and of abstract value as such. The abstraction of labor, which is the precondition for the emergence of abstract value, itself presupposes the existence of this abstract value. *It is neither a pre-abstractified labor that abstractifies exchange, nor a pre-abstractified exchange that abstractifies labor – the two processes occur at the same time and presuppose each other.*

The causality between value and labor regarding their abstraction is invertible – and this without entailing that the exploitation of labor is inherent to labor. Sohn-Rethel reproaches Marx for letting both 'natural' or 'organic' [*naturwüchsige*] social

'cooperation and the objectified relation of private property owners appear as social labor relations' (Sohn-Rethel, 1989[1970]: 178). Marx does indeed see both as social labor relations (society existed also before capitalism) – except that in the first case they are *social* in the sense of Sohn-Rethel's *first nature* (i.e. social relations among humans that are mediated through nature), whereas in the second they are *social* in the sense of the *second nature* (i.e. purely abstract and differential). The commodification of labor and, hence, the emergence of capitalism, severed *for the first time in* history the second nature from the first. (Which is what enabled the dualist misconception of the separation between words and things; but Marx's point is that the two spheres share the same structures even after the autonomization of abstract value.)

III Parmenides' coins do not accrue

'The philosophical conceptualization of rational thought is formally and historically rooted in the real abstraction of social synthesis by means of commodity exchange, that is, in the second nature' (Sohn-Rethel, 1989[1970]: 60); yet, much more than coins are required for the second nature to become independent from the first – which is the *principium specificum* of commodity exchange.

Coined money pertains to both natures, since 'the functioning of economy requires a physical material made out of precious elements, such as gold and silver' (first nature), while it is also 'distinguished by the abstract immateriality of its substrate, since in order for the exchange to be possible, its substantiality must be uncompromisingly divorced from any material use of the commodities during the transaction' (Sohn-Rethel, 1989[1970]: 62–3). From this Sohn-Rethel infers 'that money should rightly consist of a material ... of a quantitatively timeless character', and since 'no such material exists', he leaps to the conclusion that money 'is characterized by purely abstract immateriality' (ibid.: 63). Sohn-Rethel acknowledges, but only to forget, that the 'issuing authority ... guarantees that the minted coins will be replaced with [their nominal] full-value coins at no cost', in spite of their devaluation due to the wear suffered during their circulation (ibid.: 63). Coined money involves abstraction, and this abstraction is 'a reality ... of the highest conceivable objectivity' (ibid.: 61); yet – as is evidenced in the issuing authorities' obligation to recover the coins' material erosion – coined money cannot sever the two natures to the point that the second ceases to depend on the first. A further level of real abstraction is required for an economic system that would gradually sever the tie between money and a fixed commodity (e.g. gold) up to the point of establishing a global 'system of national fiat monies, with flexible exchange rates between the major currencies' (Sachs and Larrain, 1993: 223; i.e. a monetary system of purely differential values, with no material convertibility), and, further, up to the point of employing fictitious capital. And this autonomization of the second nature of value cannot find any cause in its prehistory and can instead posit its cause only retroactively, as an effect of its own emergence: the commodification of labor is presupposed for the emergence of a wholly independent system of value, which is itself presupposed for the commodification of labor. The problem of the causal generation of capital replicates the fundamental problem of secular thought: if God is not the creator (cause) of the world, then how was it created?

This question did not concern Parmenides, Sohn-Rethel's exemplary philosopher of coined money, according to whose ontology, 'the real of all things … [is] not their sensory appearance, but rather solely the One … το ov', which is 'whole in itself … immutable, indivisible, and immovable' (Sohn-Rethel, 1989[1970]: 64–5). As Sohn-Rethel admits, 'this concept' involves an 'obvious one-sidedness and ontological absolutization' (ibid.: 65), as it degrades the other side of the coin, its material nature, to a merely illusory 'sensory appearance [*Sinneserscheinung*]', as the faulty appearance of the immutable One. At least part of Sohn-Rethel's reproach to Hegel's dialectic applies also to Parmenides: 'The being with which thought was united was not the spatiotemporal being of things and relations of actual history … rather it was … nothing other than the being of thought itself' (ibid.: 3). Abstraction cannot be real as long as the material world in which it occurs is considered to be inferior to the product of abstraction. Moreover, the secularization of the abstract itself requires explaining the genesis of not only the abstract but also the material, as it can no longer be attributed to a divine creator.

IV The genesis of the second nature, or Spinoza's God

For Spinoza, 'there is only one substance', which is 'God, *or* Nature', and '[*e*]*xcept God, no substance can be or be conceived',* so that 'a substance cannot be produced by anything else', and is, therefore, 'the cause of itself' (Spinoza, 1985[1677]: 544, 420, and 412; *Ethics*, part IV, pref., and part I, prop. 14 and cor. 1, and prop. 7, dem.). God or substance '*as such* is the power of making itself actual' (Lord, 2010: 21) – the sheer *power or potentiality of self-actualization*. For this reason, 'God is the immanent, not the transitive, cause of all things' (ibid.: 428; *Ethics*, part I, prop. 18), that is, unlike a creationist God, who is conceived as a cause preceding in time the created world, Spinoza's God is an 'immanent' cause, a cause that is itself the effect of its own effects and does not exist but in its effects (like the mutual abstractification of labor and value). For Sohn-Rethel, Marx's concept of 'abstract social labor' is 'a concept of fetishism in the Hegelian tradition' insofar as, although it 'recognizes the truth of real abstraction', it 'occupies precisely the place accorded to real abstraction by the causality of exchange' (Sohn-Rethel, 1971: 70). The reason why Sohn-Rethel thinks that Marx has inverted the true causality lies in an inability to conceive of retroactivity not as a mono-directional inversion of transitive causality but as immanent causality.

V God or substance or labor-power

For Marx, 'the use-value which the worker has to offer to the capitalist' is his 'labour-power' or 'labour-capacity, the aggregate of those … mental and physical capabilities … of a human being … which he sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind' (1993[1939]: 267; 1990[1867]: 270). Since labor-power consists of *capabilities*, it 'is not materialized in a product, does not exist apart from … [the laborer] at all, thus exists not really, but only in potentiality' (ibid.: 267). Labor-power must not be conflated with the 'congealed' or abstract labor that is embodied in the commodity as the 'value substance' [*Wertsubstanz*] that constitutes the unit for measuring the amount of

value [*Wertgröße*]; rather, labor-power is the sheer potentiality of actualizing itself as congealed labor within its product – it is the *power of self-actualization*. And, as Paolo Virno remarks, '[l]abor-power incarnates (literally) a fundamental category of philosophical thought … the potential', something 'which exists only as *possibility*', and which, for the first time in history, 'is bought and sold' as the most 'exceptionally important commodity', thereby 'tak[ing] on a pragmatic, empirical, socioeconomic dimension' (Virno, 2004: 84 and 82). Capitalist objectification concerns ultimately the objectification or *commodification of substance*, that is, the process through which labor-power is *forced to actualize itself* – whatever object of utility its product may be – *always already as abstract value*. The commodification of labor-power amounts to the transformation of the power of self-actualization into abstract labor – labor-time as the substance and unit of value. That labor-power is substance qua power of self-actualization is a transhistorical fact; by contrast, the commodification of this substance is its specific historical appropriation within capitalism, and it alone brings about real abstraction proper, that is the autonomization of 'second nature'.

Only the commodification of substance (labor-power) can yield surplus-value. The accumulation of surplus-value 'cannot take place in the money itself, since … it does no more than realize … the price of the commodity it buys' and 'the commodity is paid for at its full value', (C-M) (Marx, 1990[1867]: 270). Therefore, the increase of value 'must … take place in the commodity which is bought in the first act of circulation, M-C, but not in its value'; it can 'originate only in the actual use-value of the commodity [C], i.e. in its consumption'. This 'commodity', then, must be one 'whose use-value possesses the peculiar property of being a source of value, whose actual consumption is … itself an objectification [*Vergegenständlichung*] of labour, hence a creation of value' (ibid.: 270). Surplus-value emerges because *potentiality's production and consumption overlap*, while the cost (wages) of the consumption (its purchase) of this labor is not equal with the price (exchange-value) of its product. Laborers do not labor twice, once to have their labor-power consumed by the one who bought it, and another time in order to produce a product. Yet, the price of their product is determined by the units of objectified [*vergegenständlicht*] abstract human labor within the autonomous differential relations of abstract value, whereas the cost at which laborers sell their labor-power is determined by the necessary 'means of subsistence', which are themselves culturally specific, as 'the extent of the so-called necessary requirements' and 'the manner in which they are satisfied … depend on … the habits and expectations with which the class of free workers has been formed' (ibid.: 275). As a result, and '[i]n contrast … with the case of other commodities, the determination of the value of labour-power contains a historical and moral element' (ibid.). Labor-power reveals the double sense of 'consumption', as both purchasing and using up, the latter coinciding with labor-power's exhausted productivity. *Qua* purchasing, consumption is part of exchange; *qua* using up a material, it should be part of the first nature, alongside production. Using up labor-power, however, is *using up potentiality, not anything material*, so that to use up potentiality (labor-power) means to actualize it: I purchase labor *qua* productive power, say, for £10, and I sell it qua actualized, objectified abstract labor, for 12£. *Labor-power's consumption* is its *actualization*. The reason why Marx speaks of labor as 'objectified' already within production is that labor-power is simultaneously productive and consumed (actualized as

a material thing that, *in capitalism*, is always already the bearer of abstract value), so that the labor deposited in the product during production counts not only as use-value but also *directly as objectified abstract value*. In short, with capitalism, labor constitutes the unique instance in which *the realm of utility is penetrated by the realm of exchange*, so that abstract value overlaps with utility.[5]

When labor-power is commodified, abstract value becomes an autonomous system. For, as we know from set theory, precisely in order to become an autonomous system, abstract value must include within itself its other – the spatio-temporal realm of production – while allowing it to continue to exist also as its other. Still within the realm of production, labor-power functions as productive labor exercised on specific materials, while this same expenditure of labor functions as abstract value, as if it were always already within the realm of exchange.

Thus, capitalism consists of *three autonomous, yet interpenetrating, systems*. First, there is the primary nature (utility/production), which includes within itself its own exception (value) in the form of labor-power. Second, there is the second nature (value), which includes within itself materiality (manual act of exchange). And, third, replicating both natures, there is thought. In terms of the second nature, thought is consciousness that includes within itself unconscious thought. In terms of the first nature, thought is again consciousness that includes within itself the potential – as that which ought to be, that is, ethics. This is why 'the status of the unconscious ... is ethical' and 'pre-ontological', that is, 'neither being, nor non-being, but the unrealized' (Lacan, 1981[1973]: 33 and 29–30).

With Sohn-Rethel, we understand that 'the unconscious is structured like a language' (ibid.: 20), like an autonomous system of abstract values, and, with Marx and Spinoza, that the unconscious is also structured as substance, the power of self-actualization *sub specie aeternitatis*. And, because, as we saw in the preceding section, substance is an immanent cause – being itself the effect of its own effects – Sohn-Rethel's astute shift of emphasis from production to exchange as the ultimate frame of analysis has to be supplemented by the recognition of the retroactive effects of exchange on production.

VI The law of historical materialism

Capitalist exploitation – which presupposes the autonomization of the 'second nature' – differs from the power relations that governed cooperative social labor under the dominion of the 'first nature' insofar as in the latter the power of self-actualization was idealized, whereas in the former it is commodified, which is to say, both objectified and fetishized (so that everything can function as a fetish). The idealism of secular philosophy that Sohn-Rethel critiques is itself a residue of the presecular idealization of the power of self-actualization (the monotheist conception of God) – with Hegel representing 'absolute idealism' and the 'culmination of bourgeois thought', which 'not only entitles the mind to primacy over manual work but endows it with omnipotence', since it reduces history to the actualization of that Spirit (Sohn-Rethel, 1989[1970]: 17–18 and 20). Sohn-Rethel and Hegel concur in that 'nature experiences its continuation in the form of human history there, where labor begins' (ibid.: 4), but Hegel subsumes labor, along with all nature, under Spirit, whereas for Sohn-Rethel 'human history is part of

natural history, namely … governed by material necessities' (ibid: 4). These 'material necessities', however, far exceed notions of a naïve materialism that wants to know nothing of spirits. In archaic societies, for instance, it is because the material on which people worked was itself inhabited by spirits that they would explain everything through those same spirits. If with Hegel the spirits are replaced with the Spirit, this owes again to the historically specific material conditions of both labor and thought, since the two are intertwined. The material conditions of labor and thought are always each other's incubators, whatever the level and form of abstraction may be.

As Sohn-Rethel stresses, the law of value that is intertwined with objectification and alienation is specific to capitalism; it is a historical law. Yet, Sohn-Rethel's primary thesis that, 'from the materialist perspective … pure thought is a consequence of the impact of the social real abstraction of exchange' (Sohn-Rethel, 1989[1970]: 20–1), follows from a transhistorical law: the form of thought in any historical society corresponds to the mode of real abstraction occurring in that society's economy. Greek antiquity expresses the degree of real abstraction introduced by coined money – an abstraction with one foot still in matter – whereas the philosophy of secular capitalist modernity expresses real abstraction during the gradual autonomization of value. In short, the dominance of the *Wertgesetz*, the law of value (subjective genitive) is indeed transhistorical, but the form of value and, hence, the *Wertgesetz*, the law of value (objective genitive), is historical.

VII Sohn-Rethel's methodology: Commodity fetishism

Sohn-Rethel is the first to spell out the methodology that follows from Marx's theory of commodity fetishism – the ground of Sohn-Rethel's materialist epistemontology. He grasped that Marx's 'theory of fetishism' entails 'that there is no theory of objectivity without a theory of subjectivity' (Balibar, 2007[1993]: 56 and 64–5). By discerning that abstraction occurs really within social objectivity, Marx pointed to the socio-objective genesis and formation of the subject's abstract thought. As opposed to idealist transcendentalism, which posits 'a consciousness [that] "constitutes a world" … by means of its own categories … of representation', commodity fetishism means that 'the constitution of the world is not … the work of a subject, but a genesis of subjectivity (*a* form of determinate historical subjectivity) as part (and counterpart) of the social world of objectivity … [or] "nature"' (ibid.: 65–7). In our nature, things are both material objects and representations (value), just as subjectivity and objectivity are counterparts. Accordingly, whatever is said about the object also entails knowledge about the subject, and vice versa – whence the concept *materialist epistemontology*.

The relation between Kant and Sohn-Rethel reflects the shift from the state to the market, which corresponds to the politico-epistemological shift from ideology to commodity fetishism. In both ideology and fetishism there occurs a '*splitting up* of the real community of individuals', which 'is followed by a projection … of the social relation onto an external "thing"', which in ideology is

> … an 'idol', an abstract representation which … exist[s] … in the ethereal realm of ideas (Freedom, Justice, Humanity …), whereas in [fetishism] … it is a 'fetish', a material thing

> which … belong[s] … to nature, while exerting an irresistible power over individuals. (Balibar, 2007[1993]: 76)

Ideology is marked by a dualism between immanence and transcendence, nature and the 'ethereal realm of ideas' (2007[1993] 77–8), which is why 'the theory of ideology is … a *theory of the State*', whose mode is to impose 'domination' on 'civil society' (ibid.: 78) from a position transcendent to it. In fetishism, we pass from domination to 'subjection', in the sense of not simply subjugation but, foremost, subjectivation and objectivation, that is, to repeat, the 'constitution of the "world" of subjects and objects'.

The dualist political manifestation of the real abstraction as state and ideology fostered also dualist and idealist philosophy. By contrast, Sohn-Rethel provides the theoretical framework for analysing the era governed by the market and fetishism. Accordingly, the motto of materialist epistemontology is: 'I represent the thesis of the social genesis of pure reason' (Sohn-Rethel, 1989[1970]: 21) – and since only a monist-materialist conception of being escapes the pitfall of idealizing either the word or the thing, the motto must continue – '… and of ontology'.

Notes

1. It is in this sense that '[t]he real abstraction of capitalist society is not a logical abstraction' that ignores 'differences' – a kind of intellectual distillation of the general from the concrete – 'but rather an abstraction … born from difference, from … [a] specific social determinateness … capable of articulating an entire society' (Finelli, 1987: 127; as translated in Alberto Toscano, 2008: 275–6). In other words, a structure 'is not quantitative, but topological and relational', whereby 'the sites' and their differential relations 'prevail over whatever occupies them' (Deleuze, 2004[1967]: 174).
2. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Sohn-Rethel are from Sohn-Rethel, 1978[1970]. All references to Sohn-Rethel, 1989[1970] and 1971 are my own translations.
3. The 'production of commodities' entails 'that the specific social character of private labours carried on independently of each other consists in their equality as human labour', something which, 'in the product, assumes the form of the existence of value' (Marx, 1990[1867]: 167). Albeit materially (qualitatively) different, the various kinds of labor are reduced through their socialization in capitalism to their common element and thereby become qualitatively equal: 'the social character of the equality of the various kinds of labour is reflected in the form of the common character, as values, possessed by these materially different things, the products of labour' (ibid.: 166).
4. This false reduction of the entire realm of material spatio-temporality (use as production/consumption *and* the conscious intellectual labor [*Geistarbeit*] of persons within exchange) to the realm of manual labor within production, along with the concomitant equation of the entire sphere of exchange (conscious and unconscious) and of intellectual labor within production with abstraction – all this is widely evidenced in contemporary theories of real abstraction. According to Alberto Toscano, in the relevant current Italian and English literature there is a 'juxtaposition of a commodity-centered and a labor-centered take on real abstraction', with an alignment, on the one hand, of 'commodity-exchange', 'epistemology' and 'intellectual labor', and, on the other hand, 'political economy', 'manual labor' and a 'labor-centered' approach that focuses on 'labor without qualities'. But, according to Sohn-Rethel, 'labor without qualities' is

abstract labor as such, that is, labor-time worth a specific exchange-value, and accordingly it is part and parcel of commodity-exchange – and hence of epistemology. What Toscano's classification of contemporary relevant literature evidences is that any reference to labor indiscriminatingly subsumes it under production and political economy, unless it is 'intellectual labor', in which case it pertains to an equally indiscriminatingly conceived homogeneous sphere of exchange and, hence, to epistemology. The internal split of the sphere of exchange (between conscious and unconscious aspects) that Sohn-Rethel foregrounds is, thus, reduced to the external opposition between two misconstrued spheres.

5. Among others, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that 'the computerization of production' with its 'immaterial labor' eliminates the 'heterogeneity of concrete labor', as all forms of labor 'involve … manipulation of symbols and information', so that 'labor tends toward … abstract labor' (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 292). First, whether it uses weaving machines or computers, labor as productive power is sheer potentiality and, as such, neither material nor immaterial, but virtual. Second, taken as labor objectified in the product, labor has throughout capitalism been 'abstract', and informatized capitalism has not changed this. The actual shift occurring through the computerization of production consists in the colonization of the means of production by the abstract symbols of 'second nature'. This phenomenon deserves study, but under the following double caveat. First, that the raw material required for these abstract symbols to function as means of production remain material machines. And, second, that (Marx'/Sohn-Rethel's) economic materiality and immateriality or abstraction must not be conflated with the physico-chemical eponymous distinction. The physico-chemical consistency of use-value and consciousness is not necessarily material, just as, economically, information or language taken as use-value is material. This purely relational or contextual determination of (im)materiality indicates that in capitalism, as Virno puts it, '[d]irect perception and the most spontaneous action come *last*', that is, after (unconscious) 'abstract thought' has determined the very reality of which it is the effect. 'This is the historical situation that comes about once the split between hand and mind manifests its *irreversibility*; when the *autonomy* of abstract intellect conditions and regulates the social productive process' (Virno, 2001: 171). In advanced capitalism, abstract thought is integrated in production and takes over control, since – and this is the point of commodity fetishism – 'the products do not obey their producers, but rather vice versa: the producers act according to the products' demands as soon as the latter are in the commodity form' (Sohn-Rethel, 1989[1970]: 25). I am addressing possible effects of the informatization of production in my work on biopolitics (including in Kordela, 2013); see also Virno (2004) and Lorenzo Cillario, although, to my understanding, both partake in the sliding between the two definitions of immateriality, thereby reducing computerized production to thought – be it Virno's 'general intellect' of the multitude, or Cillario's 'cognitive capital' – and, thus, losing sight of the distinction between conscious and unconscious thought, or in Toscano's words, 'of the radicality of the thesis put forward by Sohn-Rethel and paraphrased by Žižek – to wit, that under conditions of capitalism, thought is, in the final analysis, external to thought' (Toscano, 2008: 284; see also Žižek, 1989: 9–16).

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