

Title:

“From Philosophical Critique of Bad Abstraction to Historical Materialist Critique of ‘Real Abstraction’”

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Abstract

Abstraction plays a momentous role in Karl Marx’s thinking about philosophy, political economy, and those societies in which the capitalist mode of production is dominant. Of course, abstractions of various sorts are necessarily involved in all thinking, but Marx was critical of what he regarded as bad abstractions characteristic of what he called the “bourgeois horizon,” that is, the bifurcating and reifying mindset he found in political economy and much of modern philosophy. Thinking within the “bourgeois horizon” produces philosophical dichotomies such as mind and world, form and content, the conceptual and the empirical, activity and passivity, intention and action, and the “for us” (the purely subjective) and the “in itself” (the purely objective). In political economy, the “bourgeois horizon” splits production from its constitutive social form and purpose.

In our book *False Moves in Philosophy and Social Theory*, Jeanne Schuler and I probe the “bourgeois horizon” in terms of “factoring philosophy” and its “false moves.” We employ a plain conception of phenomenology as experience-based inquiry to determine whether what is conceptually distinguishable is separable. David Hume appealed to this difference with his conception of a “distinction of reason.” Using the example of a white marble sphere, Hume observes that, while I can distinguish the white color from the spherical shape, I cannot separate the two. “Factoring philosophy” engages in phenomenological “false moves” when it treats what is distinguishable but not separable as if it were separable. Unlike analytical “distinctions of reason,” these “false moves” are phenomenological mistakes, bad abstractions—bad because they falsify experience.

Marx’s philosophical critique of the “bourgeois horizon,” which targets the “false moves” of materialists and idealists alike, derives from Hegel’s critique of the mode of thinking that he identified with *Verstand*, the thinking of the understanding. However, as Georg Lukács observes, Marx turned this critique against Hegel and placed him inside the “bourgeois horizon,” “Marx reproached Hegel (and, in even stronger terms, Hegel’s successors who had reverted to Kant and Fichte) with his failure to overcome the duality of thought and being, of theory and practice, of subject and object.... In this sense Marx’s critique of Hegel is the direct continuation and extension of the criticism that Hegel himself leveled at Kant and Fichte.”¹ In Paragraph 183 of the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel refers to “civil society” as the *Verstand* state, so he was making conceptual connections between forms of thought and forms of social organization, as Marx would do.

The crux of Marx's critique of political economy is that it is based on "false moves." Political economy makes the phenomenological mistake of treating wealth, labor, and production as separable from their constitutive social forms and purposes. By contrast, Marx begins *Capital* by answering the question: What is the social form of wealth in the society under investigation? "The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an immense collection of commodities; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form."² Political economy pretends that its object of inquiry is an economy-in-general, an economy with no constitutive social form or purpose. To think there is such a thing is to be trapped in "the illusion of the economic." Political economy is riddled with bad abstractions. It compounds its mistakes by conflating its impossible economy-in-general with the capitalist mode of production. Marx attributes David Ricardo's "inability to grasp the specific form of bourgeois production" to his "obsession that bourgeois production is production as such."³

Marx's study of political economy quickly taught him that capitalist societies are dominated by abstractions, but *real* abstractions, not simply conceptual ones. The processes of "real abstraction" constitutive of the money-mediated capitalist mode of production generate the "ghostly objectivity" of value that rears up as capital. Once we recognize that production aimed at surplus value is what keeps simple commodity circulation turning, we see that value proves to be "an automatic subject."⁴

At the beginning of *Capital*, Marx argues that, because all commodities have prices, x amount of commodity A is the value equivalent of y amount of commodity B, which means that the two are equal in value terms. What is the "common element" in terms of which quantities of different commodities are equal? Marx calls that "common element" a "third thing, which in itself is neither the one nor the other."⁵ He terms that "third thing," "value," and before determining what is the substance of value, Marx tells us that it must be something strangely unnatural and immaterial: "This common element cannot be a geometrical, physical, chemical or other natural property of commodities."⁶ What is it? Marx goes on to argue that it must be labor, but congealed "homogeneous human labour": "Let us look now at the residue of the products of labour. There is nothing left of them in each case but the same phantom-like objectivity [*gespenstige Gegenständlichkeit*]; they are merely congealed quantities of homogeneous human labour, i.e. of human labour-power expended without regard to the form of its expenditure ... As crystals of this social substance, which is common to them all, they are values—commodity values [*Warenwerte*]."⁷ Value is a "supersensible" objectivity that necessarily presents itself as something other than itself, money.⁸

Value is the consequence of the processes of "real abstraction" that are constitutive of societies where wealth is generally produced in the commodity form. Marx shows in *Capital* that these commercial societies prove to be capitalist societies, that is, ones where wealth is produced for the purpose of making surplus value and endlessly accumulating capital. Marx writes: "Had we ... inquired under what circumstances all, or even the majority of products take the form of commodities, we should have found that this only happens on the basis of one

particular mode of production, the capitalist one.”⁹ The processes of the “real abstraction” of labor and wealth, which include the transformation of commodities into money (sale), produce a society “ruled by *abstractions*,” dominated by capital, which is “self-valorizing value,” what Marx calls an “automatic subject.”

“Real abstraction,” however, is not restricted to the sale of commodities, to exchange.¹⁰ “Market practices belong to the social arrangements that render labour abstract; they function as a sort of ‘labour-processing’ plant. The ‘free market’ is not an independent phenomenon; it is a moment of capital’s circulation. Consequently, any thought that the market alone makes labour ‘practically abstract’ misconceives the status of generalised commodity circulation in relation to the production process as a whole.”¹¹ Capital is a movement, a process: “Capital ... is a movement, a circulatory process through different stages which itself in turn includes three forms of the circulatory process [examined in Part 1 of *Capital 2*]. ... the movement of industrial capital is this abstraction in action.”¹²

The phrase “abstract labor,” so critical to Marx’s theory of value, has perplexed interpreters of Marx for some time, and it continues to perplex. I have identified what I call “Rubin’s dilemma,” named after the Soviet scholar I. I. Rubin, and have offered a resolution to the dilemma. It involves distinguishing several concepts. 1) We find a general concept of labor in Marx’s account of “useful labor” in section 2 of Chapter 1 of *Capital 1* and in the treatment of “the labor process in general” in Chapter 7 of *Capital 1*. “Useful labor” is not a kind of labor. 2) The general concept of “abstract labor,” understood as “expenditure of human labour-power, in the physiological sense,” abstracts from the social, material, and purposive specificity of any actual labor. “Abstract labor” in this sense is a general category, but one that has special significance for the kind of labor that produces value: “all labour is an expenditure of human labour-power, in the physiological sense, and *it is in this quality* of being equal, or abstract, human labour that it forms the value of commodities.”¹³ “Abstract labor” in this sense, “human labour in the abstract,” is not socially specific; neither is it a kind of labor. 3) What I call “practically abstract” labor is socially specific; it is validated *as* “abstract labor” in the second sense by the sale of its products, which is why Marx needs two concepts. “Rubin’s dilemma” arises when the one phrase, “abstract labor,” cannot accommodate the two concepts. “Practically abstract” labor is the social kind of labor that produces value and surplus value. 4) What some interpreters understand by “abstract labor” is actual labor that is devoid of all social and material specificity. This treats “abstract labor” in the second, “physiological” sense as if it were an actual kind of labor, but there is no such thing. No labor is devoid of every “determinate quality of productive activity.” “Abstract labor” in this fourth sense is a pseudo-concept; there is nothing for it to be the concept of.

The abstractness of capitalist society; its reduction of the qualitative to the quantitative, to the calculable—its terrible indifference—arises from the several sorts of *subsumption* under capital’s constitutive forms, which I call the “value forms.” These include formal subsumption (and *merely* formal subsumption), real subsumption, hybrid subsumption, and ideal subsumption

(sometimes with “real” consequences). I argue for the category of real subsumption without formal subsumption, as in certain non-profit firms, including universities.

Capital’s constitutive forms, the “value forms” cast many *shadow forms* that extend and accentuate the penetration of capitalist society by bad abstractions. Two of the most prominent shadow forms are utility and instrumental action—two pseudo-concepts—but there are many others, including punctuality, calculability, and exactness.

¹ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), pp. 16-17

² Karl Marx, *Capital* 1 [Fowkes], p. 125

³ Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus-Value*, Part II, p. 529.

⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital* 1 [Fowkes], p. 255).

⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital* 1 [Fowkes], p. 127.

⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital* 1 [Fowkes], p. 127.

⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital* 1 [Fowkes], p. 128.

⁸ See Section 3, “The Value-Form or Exchange-Value,” of Chapter 1 of *Capital* 1.

⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital* 1 [Fowkes], p. 273.

¹⁰ Alfred Sohn-Rethel makes this error in his *Intellectual and Manual Labour*.

¹¹ Patrick Murray, *The Mismeasure of Wealth*, Brill, 2016, p. 138.

¹² Karl Marx, *Capital* 2, p. 185

¹³ Karl Marx, *Capital* 1 [Fowkes], p. 137; my emphasis.