

“Who baptized Marx, Hegel or Kant?” On Alfred Sohn-Rethel and Beyond

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Alfred Sohn-Rethel¹ was, most remarkably, a man of one insight, and to that insight he devoted his whole career, a very long career at that. As he put it himself shortly before his death in 1990:

The work of my whole intellectual life until my 90th birthday was necessary in order to clarify and explain a semi-intuition that I had in 1921 during my university studies in Heidelberg: the discovery of the transcendental subject in the commodity-form, a guiding principle of historical materialism. I could obtain a satisfying explanation of this principle only as the result of ever-renewed ‘attacks’, which took the name of Exposés. (Quoted in Toscano 2008, p. 280)

One spectacular insight, at the age of 22, and then almost seven decades to spin it out. The exposés were never really published until 1970, but they circulated and exerted influence. One of them was a long letter addressed to Adorno in 1936, and Adorno himself emphasized the fulgurating effect it had on him: “Your letter has meant the greatest intellectual upheaval that I have experienced in the philosophical field since my first encounter with Benjamin” (quoted in Toscano: *ibid.*). Sohn-Rethel’s incisive insight is put on the par with that of Benjamin, another of

¹ The present paper is a revised version of my presentation at the conference devoted to Alfred Sohn-Rethel at the University of Chicago in May 2021, organized by Noah Zeldin and Daniel Burnfin.

Sohn-Rethel's interlocutors (whom he met in 1921 in Italy), and one can see how much this insight—the inherent tie between the commodity form and the form of thought—also stands at the core of Adorno's work (Adorno expanding it to the form of culture at large). Adorno, however, didn't really pursue this exchange and Sohn-Rethel, despite an occasional gesture of praise, remained an outsider, tellingly (precisely and literally) till after Adorno's death²—but an outsider nevertheless at the core.

The insight is very simple and striking, it can be encapsulated in one sentence, as indeed in the above quote, and then relentlessly repeated throughout his oeuvre. To give just another striking declaration in the "Preface" to the English version of *Intellectual and Manual Labor*: "And finally, with an effort of concentration bordering on madness, it came upon me that in the innermost core of the commodity structure there was to be found the 'transcendental subject'" (1978, p. xiii). Bordering on madness—the passage goes on to tell how this was indeed generally perceived as madness at the time. "Sohn-Rethel is mad!" was the verdict of his tutor Manfred Weber (the brother of Max Weber). Insisting on this madness, not willing to give up on this initial insight, precluded any academic career: "I remained an outsider all my life with my *idée fixe*" (*ibid.*). Sohn-Rethel has the makings of a romantic hero of Marxism. His moment of glory came with a huge delay, as if after the death of Adorno and Horkheimer he was called upon to carry on the torch and to present the gist of the Frankfurt school classical endeavor in the 1970s and 1980s.

Slavoj Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, the book that made him instantly famous, was published in 1989, and one should be reminded that the book that established his reputation actually starts with a discussion of Sohn-Rethel, with an argument

² A remarkable anecdote has it that it was at Adorno's funeral, in August 1969, that Sohn-Rethel met Siegfried Unseld, the head of Suhrkamp Verlag, who encouraged him to publish his manuscript *Die geistige und körperliche Arbeit*, which then appeared in 1970 (2nd edition 1972, English version 1978).

that links the critique of political economy to the question of the unconscious, something that would become one of Žižek’s signature topics. Let me just quote a few key passages, concerning this short-circuit (or infinite judgment), and briefly make four points, as the best short introduction into Sohn-Rethel.

“Before thought could arrive at pure abstraction, the abstraction was already at work in the social effectivity of the market” (Žižek 1989, p. 10). First point: there is thought before thought, thought outside of thought, already realized, actualized, embodied, articulated in externality, thought prior to thought; in Kantian parlance, a heteronomous thought, showing the structural heteronomy of ‘pure reason’, the impurity of pure reason, the preceding and material a priori of its a priori, the historic presupposition of its supposed trans-historical validity. Sohn-Rethel proposed the formulation “Exchange abstraction *is not* thought, but it has the *form* of thought” (Sohn-Rethel 1972, p. 99)—it is the *form* that thought and ‘pre-thought’ (‘ex-thought’) have in common. This form is both external and at the core—shall one say *extimate*, to use Lacan’s excellent neologism? There is like a meta-transcendental level conditioning the Kantian transcendental, the condition of possibility of the condition of possibility, yet it is not beyond (meta-), but rather extimate, in a short-circuit of the external and the intimate.

[I]f we look closely at the ontological status of what Sohn-Rethel calls the ‘real abstraction’ (that is, the act of abstraction at work in the very active process of the exchange of commodities), the homology between its status and that of the unconscious, this signifying chain which persists on ‘another Scene’, is striking: *the ‘real abstraction’ is the Unconscious of the transcendental subject*, the support of objective-universal scientific knowledge. (Žižek 1989, p. 12; my emphasis)

Second point: the central role played by form offers a striking homology between Marx and Freud. Marx and Freud have equally

insisted that the ultimate secret—of value, the commodity, etc., and of dreams, the mechanisms of the unconscious, etc.—has to be sought not in the particular content that one must disentangle and unearth under the appearances, but in the form, which is the form pertaining to appearance itself (*Erscheinungsform*, a term constantly used by Marx). Hence, the access to abstract thought in its autonomy (epistemology, cognition, science, etc.) is only possible by suppressing this external origin. What is suppressed is not the wealth of concrete determinations that one casts aside by abstracting from them, what is suppressed is *abstraction itself qua real abstraction*, pre-existing out there. What thought-abstraction represses in order to be established is real abstraction. There is an unconscious structurally involved—but is this the Freudian repression, *Verdrängung*? How far does this homology stretch?

Third point: there is a criticism of Althusser, and beyond Althusser of all those (that is, the vast majority) who conceive abstraction as a mental process, pertaining to mind alone, as the realm of thought vs. the hard external reality. The concept of real abstraction dismantles and disrupts this quasi-spontaneous assumption about the division into the mental and the real.

The ‘real abstraction’ is unthinkable in the frame of the fundamental Althusserian epistemological distinction between the ‘real object’ and the ‘object of knowledge’ in so far as it introduces a third element which subverts the very field of this distinction: the form of the thought previous and external to the thought [...]. (Sohn-Rethel 1972, pp. 13–14)

Fourth point: there is a structural blindness, a deception involved. Sohn-Rethel proposes a brilliant formulation: *Verblendung ohne Erblindung*, delusion without loss of sight (*ibid.*, p. 34), which pertains *both* to the commodity exchange and to abstract thought. There is an absence of conscious awareness, but which is essential for both sides to exist at all:

‘[T]his non-knowledge of the reality is part of its very essence’: the social effectivity of the exchange process is a kind of reality which is possible only on condition that the individuals partaking in it are not aware of its proper logic; that is, a kind of reality whose very ontological consistence implies a certain non-knowledge of its participants—if we come to ‘know too much’ [...] this reality would dissolve itself. (Žižek 1989, p. 15)

Real abstraction, central to Sohn-Rethel’s argument, is at the core of both exchange abstraction and thought abstraction and can only function unwittingly, implying Marx’s notorious *sie wissen es nicht, aber sie tun es*, “they don’t know it, but they are nevertheless doing it.” There is a necessary ‘unconsciousness’ at the core of our activity, both in practice and in theory, and particularly in what secretly binds them together. Not being conscious of it is the condition for these entities to exist at all, their condition of possibility. One can note a curious divergence with Althusser: in Althusser deception-blindness pertains to ideology, it has to be dissipated by the epistemological break, whereas with Sohn-Rethel it equally pertains to the very break instituting epistemology, pure cognition, science, etc. In Althusser the epistemological break dispels deception, in Sohn-Rethel it is the very expression of a structural deception.

Let me now address the way that Sohn-Rethel addresses our title question. The English version of *Intellectual and Manual Labor* (1978) is not a faithful translation of the German original (1970, second edition 1972), although, to be sure, the argument is basically the same, yet with quite a few differing twists, nuances, additions, and omissions. The title question stems from the German second edition and doesn’t appear in English: “Who baptized Marx, Hegel or Kant?” “Wer war nun aber Marxens Täufer, Hegel oder Kant?” (Sohn-Rethel 1972, p. 35) Sohn-Rethel poses this question at a crucial point in the first section of the first part, the entire section bearing the title “Kritische Anknüpfung an Hegel oder an Kant?,” roughly “Shall we seek critical support in Hegel

or in Kant?” In both cases, the section title and the quote, there is the form of question, both sentences don’t affirm anything, on the face of it, but end with a question mark—they ‘merely’ ask. Do they? Is there such a thing as merely asking, can one just innocently ask a question? (In principle, any question.)³ Hegel appears as the first part of the alternative, given that the majority of Marxist tradition took Hegel as the key reference point, not surprisingly, taking the cue from Marx himself, who started his career in the young-Hegelian circle and then kept critically engaging with Hegel throughout his life. One can hardly make such a case for Kant, who is rarely mentioned by Marx (if so, only in passing or with rare harsh criticism, cf. *The German Ideology*). Conspicuously, there is not a single mention of Kant in the *Capital* (vol. 1), Sohn-Rethel’s key text.⁴ So is there a question? The rhetorical question implicitly proposes the non-obvious choice, which would be the choice of Kant in the proposed alternative, and the non-obvious answer is of course more intriguing and provoking reflection.

The first thing to be said, the first impression of even a superficial reading: Sohn-Rethel can hardly hide his animosity toward Hegel. The English version is on the whole even harsher in this respect, so we can read:

[Hegel] discarded the epistemological approach altogether and outstripped the limitations of the critical standards of thinking observed by Kant [...] in order to lift himself to the height of ‘speculative and absolute idealism’. (Sohn-Rethel 1978, p. 14)

Sohn-Rethel immediately admits to the “apparently disparaging treatment of Hegel” (*ibid.*). The road from Kant to Marx, he

³ I must refer to the wonderful book by Aron R. Bodenheimer, *Warum? Von der Obszönität des Fragens*, 1983 (second edition 2011). Its aim is to dismantle the very form of questioning as a form of disavowal.

⁴ As far as I can see there is no mention in vols. 2 and 3 either. Curiously, Kant is more frequently mentioned by Engels, although still very sporadically.

says, shouldn't necessarily lead via Hegel, there has to be a direct route connecting the two, where one could avoid the damaging Hegelian sidetrack and by-pass Hegel.

There is a strange oscillation in Sohn-Rethel's treatment of Hegel, disparaging judgments cohabit with high appraisal, the latter pronounced as if against his will. There is something of the 'I know very well, but nevertheless' argument. Most conspicuously, there is a clear and repeated criticism of Kant on account of his dualism—dualism is singled out as Kant's fundamental fallacy, but a fallacy that nevertheless presents a true reflection of the bourgeois society that has to be addressed: “For the unyielding dualism of this philosophy is surely a more faithful reflection of the realities of capitalism than can be found in the efforts of the illustrious post-Kantians [...]” (*ibid.*, p. 15). By not diluting the dualism Kant offers a clear case, a test case for what is at stake in abstraction, and by extension in the division intellectual/manual highlighted in the title of the book. The dualism is ultimately that of “thinking and being, ideal and reality/actuality, essence and appearance, form and matter, etc.” (Sohn-Rethel 1972, p. 32) (to which one can add intuition and understanding, and furthermore Kant's treatment of unresolvable antinomies, etc.). Now the great advantage of Hegel over Kant is the intervention of dialectics, i.e., the insight into the unity of those dualities, the interconnection of the seemingly irreducible dichotomies and antitheses—to start with, the duality of thinking and being. “Their unity is their truth,” and this is truth as a process, truth in becoming, truth historically evolving. Quite incredibly, Sohn-Rethel is thereby led to declare: “Nevertheless I admit that the dialectic as evolved by Hegel affords a way of thinking which is infinitely superior to the fixed dualism of Kant” (*ibid.*). If dialectics is the superior way of thought, why then the return to Kant?

The trouble with the Hegelian dialectics, in Sohn-Rethel's reading, despite its insight into the unity of dualities and contradictions, is that it ultimately proposes a false unity, an ideal

unity, not a real unity — it is ultimately the unity of thought which sublates being as an inner moment of the movement and deployment of spirit. It thus reduces alterity and objectivity to an internal moment of self-deployment of thought/spirit, turning it ultimately into the process “of the mind within the mind” (Sohn-Rethel 1978, p. 16), reducing it to the immanence of spirit. The unity of thought and being is achieved merely under the auspices of thought which swallows its other. Furthermore, considering Hegel’s stance toward history, despite his enthusiasm for the French revolution he nevertheless envisaged history as a history of ideas, revolution was for him a “philosophical event” under “the domination of thought” (Sohn-Rethel 1972, p. 31). As a consequence, he was incapable of thinking the reality of capitalism that it instituted — how society became prey to being gobbled by capital, *zum Fressen des Kapitals* (*ibid.*). Ideal unity instead of real unity — a right step in the wrong direction? The implication seems to be that in face of the ‘imagined’ unity of being and thought one should rather ultimately prefer Kant’s ‘real’ dualism, which has the advantage that it doesn’t dilute the opposites.

So who baptized Marx, Hegel or Kant? The least one can say is that Sohn-Rethel comes up with an unsatisfactory answer, offering a sort of quasi-reconciliation of the two, at least rhetorically. No doubt Hegel is a step forward and no doubt historical materialism couldn’t be possible without Hegel’s invention of the historicity of the Absolute, conceiving truth as a historical process.

What this amounts to is that the problem of cognition [*Erkenntnisproblem*] in Kantian formulation posits itself against the background of historical materialism, induced [*induziert*] by Hegel, therefore not Kant or Hegel, so to speak, but Kant in Hegel’s framework [*Kant im Rahmen Hegels*]. Ultimately this is not about the one or the other, but about the modes of appearance of the intellectual/spiritual labor in its separation from the manual labor as a problem of historical materialism. (Sohn-Rethel 1972, p. 37)

This rather sounds like a bad compromise that doesn't resolve our question but let me attempt a charitable reading. We need the Hegelian advance, which, even if insufficient, enabled historical materialism, in order to make a step back to Kant, so that on the basis of newly gained historicity we can properly ask the question about the seemingly ahistorical cognition of nature and its epistemology (mathematics, physics, particularly with the advances of Galilean-Newtonian science, etc.), ultimately condensed in the transcendental subject, and demonstrate its historical conditioning in a non-Hegelian framework. There is a historicity of the 'ahistorical' (a-temporal, timeless) that exceeds the Hegelian historicity, and this is where Hegel's dialectic could rather present an impediment. Why? Expanding the argument, one could say that Sohn-Rethel constantly and forcefully argues against the common idea that abstraction is a feat of thought, something that happens merely in the mind, and promotes his idea of real abstraction which is part of the world out there.

But the philosopher who would have no problem with that and no objection to it is definitely Hegel—for him the idea of real abstraction is so to speak the starting point, and the suggestion of abstraction being merely in the head would be preposterous (and one can read his *Phenomenology of Spirit* as a process of being rid of such simplistic ideas, opposing consciousness vs. reality, etc.—i.e., precisely as a process of learning about real abstraction, as it were). Of course there is real abstraction out there, in both nature and society, of course real abstraction is the basis of thought abstraction, they mutually condition each other. So let me put it this way: Hegel's espousal of real abstraction as quasi self-evident is precisely a hindrance on the way to the real abstraction that Sohn-Rethel is after—the precise nexus of commodity form and the particular forms of abstraction that emerged with the advent of philosophy in ancient Greece and culminated with the Kantian categories and transcendental subjectivity. Hegel's espousal of real abstraction is rather in line with (at the end of the line) the

traditional philosophical realism (as opposed to nominalism), positing *universalia in re*, ‘universals in things’, to use the medieval wording of the long controversy about *universalia* (stretching back to Plato and Aristotle). So, Hegel’s too quick espousal of real abstraction obfuscates the true source of real abstraction in a particular worldly practice, far removed from ideas, a seemingly trivial activity, but which nevertheless yields philosophical and scientific concepts. There is a ‘dirty’ core of pure thought, a ‘base’ origin of its loftiness; there is an infinite judgment not considered by Hegel, not quite the bone Hegel had in mind. (One could imagine Sohn-Rethel saying to Hegel, in line with Freud’s joke: Why are you telling me that there is real abstraction out there in the world when I know for a fact that there is real abstraction out there—why are you lying to me?)

There is a common criticism of Sohn-Rethel, voiced already at the time of his major publications in the seventies, and then often advanced later (often is relative, Sohn-Rethel didn’t come up often), notably by Moishe Postone (1993), namely that Sohn-Rethel takes his starting point in the process of exchange, and deduces everything from there, while never seriously considering the process of production/labor, the reputedly central category of Marxism, and its role in the commodity universe—its conversion into *abstract labor*, as the measure of value, and its key function in producing surplus value. Sohn-Rethel of course mentions all these, but rather occasionally, the bulk of his argument indeed rests on the precise minimal/maximal implications of the commodity exchange: the reduction of all positive material qualities, of use value, the fact that use and exchange are mutually exclusive, the immutability of the commodity during the exchange, the transubstantiation of the commodity in the process of exchange, etc. In the limit, the table of all Kantian a priori categories is deducible from the activity of exchange (although Sohn-Rethel’s deductions are sometimes forced and not quite convincing). As to labor, his main focus is not its production of value and its measure of value,

nor its abstract character, but the separation of head and hand, spirit and body, the intellectual and the manual, which lies at the core of pure cognition. The repressed/suppressed is twofold: the process of exchange, and manual labor, i.e., the process of abstraction involved in the exchange, and the corporeal involved in manual labor. (Real) abstraction and the body are both repressed in the same move.⁵ Thus Sohn-Rethel’s capital sin would consist in concentrating on the sphere of exchange–distribution and leaving aside the sphere of production, the true site of Marxist theory. The primary scene of real abstraction is for him not abstract labor, but the act of exchange.

I guess one should defend Sohn-Rethel in this respect. The argument against him rests on the idea that production is the site of truth—what determines all other spheres in the notorious ‘last instance’. It is the site of ‘proper’ materiality, hence a test of materialism, while the sphere of exchange, distribution (and consumption) presents an ‘illusory’ epiphenomenon, a secondary reality in relation to the primacy of production (ultimately a sphere of appearance as opposed to the true essence).⁶ But this is not in line with Marx’s basic move, and Sohn-Rethel’s adamant insistence on form is closer to Marx. Value is indeed created in the process of production, but it is only actualized in the process of exchange which conditions its form, endowing it precisely with the commodity form. It is not that production is the secret core which would then be secondarily represented by the commodity

⁵ Of course, not every act of exchange involves the separation intellectual/manual. The historical occurrence of the coincidence of the two emerged with the advent of philosophy in ancient Greece and was conditioned by the introduction of coinage (dated to 680 BCE)—see Sohn-Rethel’s long argument in this respect, largely relying on the extensive work of George Thomson. Coinage ‘materialized’ the exchange abstraction (turning its ‘in itself’ into a ‘for itself’, as it were) and enabled the separation, the emergence of ‘pure’ intellectual work (e.g., with the origin of mathematics, etc.).

⁶ See Žižek 2006, pp. 50–55.

form in the process of exchange—as opposed to this, Marx insists that the main secret pertains to the form itself: the ‘essence’ needs this particular form and the form is ‘essential’. Marx:

Whence, then, arises the enigmatic character of the product of labor, as soon as it assumes the form of a commodity? Clearly, it arises from this form itself. (Marx 1976, p. 164)

Political economy has indeed analyzed value and its magnitude, however incompletely, and has uncovered the content concealed within these forms. But it has never once asked the question why this content has assumed that particular form, that is to say, why labor is expressed in value, and why the measurement of labor by its duration is expressed in the magnitude of the value of the product. (*Ibid.*, 1972, pp. 173-174)

Marx couldn't be clearer: the difficult part is not to disentangle the hidden content, i.e., labor as the source and measure of value—this was already done by the bourgeois economy, notably by Ricardo. The difficult part is to see how this content acquired this particular form, the commodity form—what follows from there is a *materialism of the form*, not the materialism of content-labor. (And debunking the labor theory of value behind the commodity form of appearance doesn't dissipate the mystery, the enigma, the ghost-like spectral dimension of commodity. The metaphysical subtleties and theological quirks pertain to the form.) Marx constantly uses the term *Erscheinungsform*, the form of appearance, but the fact that the form pertains to appearance doesn't make it less real—materialism should take seriously the materiality of appearance itself, not merely unearth the hidden materiality behind it. What Sohn-Rethel calls the real abstraction is the real of this form of appearance itself, not a real as opposed to appearance. After all, the incipit of *Capital*, the first sentence establishing its object, firmly places the project (rather the proper beginning of the project) in the sphere of appearance:

The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails *appears* [*erscheint*] as an ‘immense collection of commodities’; the individual commodity *appears* as its elementary form. Our investigation therefore begins with the analysis of the commodity. (*Ibid.*, p. 125; my emphasis)

Hence Marx begins not with production, labor, the alleged material basis of it all, but with the commodity, hence exchange, hence appearance, hence form. And Sohn-Rethel can find a direct endorsement for his project in Marx:

The categories of bourgeois economics consist precisely of forms of this kind. They are forms of thought [*Gedankenformen*] which are socially valid, and therefore objective, for the relations of production belonging to this historically determined mode of social production, i.e. commodity production. (*Ibid.*, p. 169)

The commodity form is the form of thought, Sohn-Rethel’s crazy *idée fixe* is inscribed in Marx in all letters—all he had to add is ‘transcendental subjectivity’.⁷

Nevertheless, there are weaknesses to Sohn-Rethel’s argument, quite apart from this common criticism which, I think, doesn’t hit the mark. No doubt he owes us some more explanation as to how and why the ‘same’ real abstraction, pertaining to commodity exchange, yielded both the origin of philosophy (and science) in Greece⁸ and, at the opposite end, the Kantian transcendentalism,

⁷ The big question remains whether this conception of form can be directly linked with Kant, which is Sohn-Rethel’s agenda and absolute preference—my contention would be that it is at the bottom a very Hegelian conception of form (see form of appearance in relation to essence in the *Logic*, etc.). In Kant, form rather stands opposite to the content (see ‘concepts without intuition are empty’, etc.). Or is Kant in his heart secretly already Hegel who doesn’t dare to say his name?

⁸ The introduction of coinage was crucial for the emergence of ancient philosophy and science. Hence one of the most famous of Sohn-Rethel’s pronouncements: “Anybody who carries coins in his pocket and understands their

a priori categories, etc. What happened with the real abstraction in the meantime, over two and a half millennia, how did it evolve to produce such a variety of results in the domain of thought throughout history? What of the history of science, given that Sohn-Rethel is specifically focused on the epistemology of sciences of nature? And most importantly: How did real abstraction change its nature with the advent of capitalism? Is there a qualitative transformation, given its new gear and its quantitative global spread? Sohn-Rethel insists that the Kantian position presented the historic philosophical counterpart to the revolution in modern science coinciding with the contemporary rise of capitalism, but then it's rather strange that he is able to deduce the Kantian a priori categories from the very elementary forms of exchange, already present in antiquity. It all seems that he doesn't really need the capitalist development to propose his short-circuit/infinite judgment linking commodity form and this most elaborate form of thought (transcendental subjectivity), notoriously one of the most complex in the entire history of thought. Does the emergence of philosophy, pure mathematics, etc., in antiquity differ in kind from the Galilean-Newtonian science in regard to its (non)relation to real abstraction? How can the 'same' kernel of real abstraction produce such a variety of models of thought?

Ultimately, how does real abstraction relate to the problem of capital and its corresponding forms of thought? It is clear that Sohn-Rethel takes amply into account only the first three chap-

functions bears in his mind, whether or not he is aware of it, ideas, which no matter how hazily, reflect the postulates of the exchange abstraction" (Sohn-Rethel 1978, p. 59). See his line apropos of mathematics (and science in general): "This socialized mind of man [...] is *money without its material attachments*, therefore immaterial and no longer recognizable as money and, indeed no longer being money but the 'pure intellect'" (*ibid.*, 130; my emphasis). The very idea of 'categories' was canonized by Aristotle, and then reprised by Kant—Kant pointing out that logic made no progress since Aristotle, it was born perfect and unimprovable, it only needs to be properly framed by the transcendental turn. Curiously, Sohn-Rethel barely mentions Aristotle once.

ters of *Capital* (“The commodity”, “The process of exchange”, “Money, or the circulation of commodities”), but it looks like he has no real use for the fourth chapter, where capital finally ‘makes its appearance’ (“The transformation of money into capital” (Part 2), “The general formula for capital”). It’s only there that the production and appropriation of surplus value come in, the cornerstone of Marx’s insight. The general formula for capital is precisely M-C-M’ (as opposed to C-M-C of the ‘elementary’ commodity exchange), ‘money breeding money’—it is here that the real abstraction gets very real, even realer (!), to the point of “gobbling up the whole of society” (*ibid.*, p. 31). What form of thought would then correspond to this? Is the Kantian transcendental subject a match for this? Doesn’t Sohn-Rethel deduce real abstraction and the concomitant forms of thought ultimately only on the basis of C-M-C?⁹

The idea that the Hegelian idea, the Hegelian spirit, behaves like capital has a long standing, it can be traced back to Marx himself, and it kept coming up in the history of Marxism—one could list, e.g., Adorno and Postone as major proponents. Does this idea present an extension of Sohn-Rethel’s argument about the real abstraction as the core of thought? Could one then propose that the logic of capital presents the concealed core of Hegel’s *Logic*, and by extension of the development of spirit, in the same way that Kant’s transcendental subject related to real abstraction in commodity exchange? What is the status of this—an analogy? In Sohn-Rethel’s argument it is essential that real abstraction is no mere analogy (although he uses the term homology), it aims at the real alien kernel of abstract thought in the (non)relation of a form of being and a form of thought.

⁹ One should keep in mind, though, that C-M-C and M-C-M’ don’t present a historical succession, but a structural relation—to make it quick, on the one hand, Aristotle’s ranting against chrematistics in *Politics* is already based on his criticism of M-C-M’ logic; on the other hand, C-M-C can only be deduced as an elementary form on the basis of developed capitalist commodity production.

Schematically, there are three attitudes to Hegel in Marxist tradition. The first one is presented by those who rejected Hegel altogether and saw his influence as detrimental, trying to minimize Marx's (rather obvious) indebtedness, sometimes paying some lip-service to it, but ultimately proposing to by-pass him altogether—one can list most obviously Althusser and his school, the Italians (Galvano Della Volpe, Lucio Colletti), etc., and among the Frankfurt theoreticians precisely Sohn-Rethel, the odd one out in this respect. Second position, taking the cue from Marx's assessment (particularly in "The Paris manuscripts") that Hegel presented the self-creation of man as a process, the man as the result of his own labor, through the process of alienation as the condition of dis-alienation—all this, but in the Hegelian mystified form, as a merely spiritual enterprise, as opposed to the material labor and material historic conditions. What would then be needed is to set his dialectic from head to feet, since what he presents is ultimately the process of emancipation, but in disguise. If we shed off the mystical cover, there is the rational kernel we must hold on to. Most conspicuously, Lukacs presented the proletariat as the subject-object of history destined to re-appropriate the objectivity, produced by its labor and now standing alien opposite to it: instead of ideal reconciliation, real revolution and re-appropriation. In the third perspective, Hegel is seen not as a matrix of an undercover emancipatory logic, but as the matrix of the very logic of capital, reproducing in thought what capital performs in reality, with the pervasive surge that can encompass everything in its movement, expanding while circulating, engulfing every singularity in its universal deployment, positing every externality as an internal moment of its self-movement. Leaving aside the anti-Hegelians, which is it to be, the logic of universal emancipation or the logic of universal domination? Can it be both?¹⁰

¹⁰ Žižek has pointed out this dual view of Hegel in Marxism a number of times, I am making it quick.

There is no doubt that Marx describes the movement of capital, the transformation of money into capital, in terms that can only recall the movement of the Hegelian idea, even more, of substance becoming subject. Once we move from C-M-C (the circulation still based on the move from the initial use value to the final use value, thus still in the service of satisfaction of needs—commodity is defined on the first page as an object that can satisfy needs of any sort— with money as mere mediator) to M-C-M', where the mediator, the universal equivalent of value, becomes the subject, the initiating and the final point of the process, then we enter into an ever-expanding circle where any commodity becomes subservient to the self-movement of this substance-subject. Money turns from medium to subject.

[I]n the circulation M-C-M' both the money and the commodity function only as different modes of existence of value itself, the money as its general mode of existence, the commodity as its particular or, so to speak, disguised mode. It is constantly changing from one form into the other, without becoming lost in this movement; it thus becomes transformed into an *automatic subject*. [...] In simple circulation, the value of commodities attained at the most a form independent of their use-values, i.e. the form of money. But now, in the circulation M-C-M', value suddenly presents itself as a *self-moving substance* which passes through a process of its own, and for which commodities and money are both mere forms. (Marx 1976, pp. 255, 256; my emphasis)¹¹

There is, first, the very Hegelian moment, namely the capacity to posit the presuppositions—to take something which evolved in the process as the retroactive presupposition of the process itself. Something that emerged later, as a second, as a product

¹¹ In another translation, value “suddenly presents itself as an independent substance, endowed with a motion of its own, passing through a life-process of its own, in which money and commodities are mere forms which it assumes and casts off in turn” (quoted in Žižek 2006, p. 59).

of a process (of exchange, etc.), becomes retroactively the starting point which then encompasses all other entities as its inner moments, moments of its self-deployment. Second, this process becomes all-pervasive, universal, as it were, so that any externality is internalized, any singularity is included in the process of universalization. Third, this now has all the makings of an automatic subject (Marx's term) which proceeds as a self-moving substance (Marx's term again). From which it would follow that substance is subject, (automatic) subject as the mover of the self-moving substance. Is this the material realization of Hegel's famous adage 'substance is subject', the one adage on which, according to his own words, everything depends in his philosophy?¹² Is this the social process which forms the disavowed secret kernel of the Hegelian 'substance is subject'? Could one say that in the same way that Sohn-Rethel makes the short-circuit connection between the Kantian transcendental subject and the commodity form, but taken at the level of the simple exchange (C-M-C), in the same way one should make the connection between the Hegelian substance-subject and the movement of capital, the formula M-C-M'? That in both cases we hit upon the unconscious of thought, thought external to itself, prefigured in economic reality, unwittingly extending in thought? The hard kernel that has to remain concealed? Or is it rather that we are dealing with a caricature of what Hegel had in mind? There is Marx's obvious reliance on Hegel when he describes this crucial passage (from money to capital), but on what level does the parallel apply?

Three things have to be noted. First, what is being described here? Is this the description of the way that things really happen, of how capital really functions, or is this rather the description of a necessary illusion inherent to capital itself? Namely the illusion

¹² One could apply this also to another notorious Hegelian formula, *Sichanderswerden*, self-othering—capital has an infinite capacity of self-othering: it remains itself, or rather becomes even more itself, when encompassing its other, in ever wider reach, in both external and internal expansion.

that this is an automatic process of self-engendering, value engendering and multiplying itself by mere circulation, finding itself in its otherness, appropriating any otherness that it comes across? Or shall we say ‘objective fantasy’, objective illusion.

How come that capital corresponds so well to this Hegelian fantasy—or does it? Isn’t it rather that one has to transform Hegel’s dialectic into this fantasy formation in order to conform it to the movement of capital? Marx may well have used the Hegelian tools (‘substance is subject’) as a conceptual model for this transformation (from money to capital), and shown its function as a necessary illusion, but only to confront it with the harsh reality of the extraction of surplus value, the exploitation that underlies this process of the seeming self-movement, self-engendering, and self-expansion. The surplus it produces is not internally (‘automatically’) deduced from value as its immanent explicitation, it doesn’t follow from what value is ‘in itself’, it is based on extortion practiced in the harsh conditions of class struggle. The labor that produces the surplus in this apparent self-movement remains invisible in this quasi-Hegelian fantasy circle.

But it’s not only the extortion of surplus value, and this is my second point, it is already with the act of exchange that this smooth image doesn’t hold. Kojin Karatani—another Marxist Kantian, to make it quick (but he curiously never mentions Sohn-Rethel)—argued that there is a ‘jump’ already in the exchange of commodities themselves (in Žižek’s useful gloss):

[T]he jump by means of which a commodity is sold, and thus effectively constituted as commodity, is not the result of an immanent self-development of (the concept of) Value, but a *salto mortale* [...], a temporary ‘synthesis’ between use-value and exchange-value comparable to the Kantian synthesis between sensitivity and understanding: in both cases, the two irreducibly external levels are brought together. [...] This is why, although Marx’s *Darstellung* of the self-deployment of Capital is full of Hegelian references, the self-movement of Capital is far from the circular self-movement of the Hegelian Concept (or Spirit). (Žižek 2006, p. 51)

Thus even on the level of simple exchange, there is no immanence of progression, there is no mere conceptual deduction from value to exchange—it takes a leap, and a (temporary) synthesis to be constantly negotiated. This is why Karatani is right to point out:

Notwithstanding the Hegelian descriptive style [...] *Capital* distinguishes itself from Hegel's philosophy in its motivation. The end of *Capital* is never the 'absolute Spirit'. *Capital* reveals the fact that capital, though organizing the world, can never go beyond its own limit. (Karatani 2003, p. 9)

This is not the movement of Hegelian spirit-idea towards absolute knowledge or some final sublation-reconciliation in the absolute spirit, there is something unlimited and crazy in this movement, something never to be quenched, but which, despite its frenzy, nevertheless presents its own limit. This is precisely what Hegel would call bad infinity, spurious infinity, which cannot transcend its limit despite its furious ever-expanding accelerating movement—the worse the bad infinity, the more feverish the whirlwind. This is not a movement towards some Hegelian totality, for capital is propelled by the impossibility to ever catch up with itself.

So is Hegel's philosophy then an 'adequate' unwitting rendition of the inherent 'necessary illusion' of capital, a portrayal of its in-built fantasy, which then has to be debunked and brought down to earth by pointing out the harsh reality underlying it, which it covers over? Hardly, and this is my third point. One has to transform Hegel's philosophy into this fantasy form, one has to curtail it in order to fit this image—one has to deprive it of everything that is interesting, intriguing, productive and, well, revolutionary in Hegel. This clearly presents a caricature of Hegel (I am leaving aside the question of Hegel not being completely innocent in lending himself to such caricature). As to the question whether

one can make an analogous move with Hegel such as Sohn-Rethel did with Kant (the parallel ‘commodity form—transcendental subjectivity’ vs. ‘capital—substance-subject’, as two forms of real abstraction), I think this is not the case and one would thus move far too quickly. Not because Hegel would be exempt from such ‘infinite judgment’, but rather because Hegel didn’t quite realize the implications of capital, the speculative nature it entailed, or he grossly underestimated what was at stake. Which is no doubt Hegel’s historical limitation, given his vantage point.

Hegel’s theory of capitalism is encapsulated in his idea of civil society. To make it quick, this is the sphere where private individuals are free to pursue their own self-interest, without regard for the common good, ignoring the universal. They can give free reign to their individual pursuits, but the result of their activity is that they are nevertheless compelled to produce common good as an unintended side-effect of their private interests. In the *Phenomenology* he described this dialectic under the label *der geistige Tierreich*, the spiritual animal kingdom (Hegel 1977, pp. 237–252), displaying how the ruse of reason (whose fitting instance is Smith’s notorious invisible hand of the market) plays its tricks behind the backs of selfish greedy individuals, a common universality nevertheless arising from the clash of private interests, albeit in a limited form. That would be the realm of the free market (and the liberal theoreticians stopped there, with private vices yielding public benefits). Hegel was of course no believer in some self-regulatory market forces, but proposed the function of the state as the proper universal in which the private interests can be elevated into the realm of true universality. The civil society would thus be hostage to a limited universality, say pertaining to understanding (*Verstand*), while the true universality of reason could only be attained in the state, as the realm of sublation and reconciliation of the conflicts of private interests. Capitalism would thus be confined to a particular social sphere, where it could usefully deploy all economic forces, but only if

ultimately framed by the state as the embodiment of reason.¹³ In itself, the civil sphere cannot achieve stability or totality merely on the basis of private pursuits and the strife of interests. This is what one could call the Hegelian fantasy of capitalism: capitalism contained, or shall we say capitalism within the limits of reason alone, *innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*.

What Hegel overlooked, in this neat scheme/division, what he couldn't quite see from his historic position, was the conceptual possibility of the advent and spread of capitalism of a quite different order—namely the emergence, within civil society, of a force that doesn't comply simply with the limited universality of understanding (emerging through the conflict of private interests) nor does it translate into the true universality which can only be achieved by the state (and reason). There is, so to speak, a third kind of universality—and capital is precisely a force of permanent universalization, engulfing all particularity on its way in its movement, but a universality running amok, as it were, a wild seemingly limitless universality, blindly following a crazy expansive logic. The 'third kind' is of course not an appropriate designation, it is rather an excrescence, a deviation of universality. It is encapsulated in what Marx called automatic subject, or what he described precisely in terms of self-moving substance-subject, i.e., in arch-Hegelian terms, but in order to present a logic of universality that eluded Hegel, a (false) universality whose force Hegel didn't foresee. One could say that this is something he critically envisaged as a bad infinity yet didn't realize its overwhelming insidious potential. Historically, civil society was not framed (and

¹³ This is where the very young Marx started his criticism of Hegel, e.g., in his manuscript "Critique of Hegel's philosophy of state jurisprudence [*Staatsrecht*]" (1843) and a number of others. His main point was that the reason pertaining to Hegel's state, far from superseding the clashing self-interests of civil society was in its very rationality rather in collusion with them, enabling and conditioning what it was supposed to supersede, thus being prey to and accomplice of the perverted logic of budding capitalism.

superseded) by the state, the bearer of the true universal—what happened instead was that this ‘false’ universality encompassed both civil society and the state and turned them into its hostage, completely disrupting Hegel’s proposed dialectics of state and civil society. It is as if bad infinity wins. Modern states, and civil societies, started to be increasingly at the mercy of this universalizing force. My proposal would be that the trouble is that capital doesn’t behave in the Hegelian manner at all, but rather deploys a kind of universality that Hegel didn’t quite anticipate or whose power he grossly underestimated, a perversion of universality at the very interstice where unlimited reason should supersede limited understanding.

Žižek proposed that Hegel missed precisely the properly speculative Hegelian nature of the capital:

What Hegel was not able to see was not some post-Hegelian or post-idealist reality but rather the properly Hegelian aspect of the capitalist economy. Here, paradoxically, Hegel was not idealist enough, for what he failed to see was the properly speculative content of the capitalist speculative economy, the way financial capital functions as a purely virtual notion processing ‘real people’. (Žižek 2014, p. 31)

But what we have to deal with here is perhaps not the properly Hegelian speculative dimension now finding its new domain in capital, but massively its ‘deviation’, its outgrowth, its capacity to run amok, its aberration, its perversion; its travesty having the capacity to overwhelm and undermine any ‘true’ universality. ‘Speculative’ is the term that one should single out and read in the sense of the Freudian *Gegensinn der Urworte*, “On the anti-theoretical meaning of primary words” (Freud 1994): the Hegelian meaning of speculation as the proper exercise of thought now coinciding with financial speculation, creating value ‘out of nothing’, through shady unfounded transactions, futures, by-passes and unfathomable circulation, from thin air, without coverage,

but nevertheless englobing all spheres of 'real' societies. Is this immediate coincidence of the two meanings of speculation a sort of ultimate parody of the Hegelian infinite judgment that befell Hegel's legacy? The Hegelian speculation was precisely a move that transcended the bad infinity, while the speculation pertaining to the capital is like the infinitization of the bad infinity, perhaps not a bad name for the nightmare of our times. Bad infinity raised to the level of bad speculation, the seemingly most speculative moment as the straying away from speculation.

Sohn-Rethel's contention was that real abstraction pertaining to the commodity form spelled out the secret of Kant's transcendental subjectivity. The prevailing view in Marxism followed Marx's patent Hegelian references and rather saw capital as the secret real abstraction of Hegelian universality, so to speak. But what if there is a real in this abstraction that is of a different order, albeit encapsulated in the Hegelian universal as its outgrowth and perversion? The universal and its ghastly double? This is where the proper work of construction of universality for our times must engage.

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