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**Value Form and Abstract Labour in Marx.**  
**A critical review of Alfred Sohn-Rethel's notion of "real abstraction"**

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Marx defines the social homogenisation of individual production processes by introducing the term *abstract labour*. Labour *has* a dual nature – on the one hand it is concrete labour (labour which produces a concrete use value) and on the other is at the same time abstract labour, *labour that is from the social viewpoint qualitatively identical*. From this stem the commensurability and exchangeability of the products of labour as commodities:

“The labour contained in exchange-value is abstract universal social labour, which is brought about by the universal alienation of individual labour” (Marx 1981: 56-7).

This means that

“every commodity is *the* commodity which, as a result of the alienation of its particular use-value, must appear as the direct materialisation of universal labour-time” (Marx 1981: 45).

Put in another way, every commodity attains the social form of general exchangeability, in abstraction from its specific utility or any other characteristic, expressing its value in monetary units.

And it is exactly *commodity exchange*, which renders abstract each and every concrete labour. As Marx writes,

“Social labour-time exists in these commodities in a latent state, so to speak, and becomes evident only in the course of their exchange. [...] Universal social labour is consequently not a ready-made prerequisite but an emerging result” (Marx 1981: 45).

The merit of Alfred Sohn-Rethel's analysis is that it brings to the fore the fact that we have here a real abstraction, as he names it, more accurately the exchange abstraction, meaning that it is a self-contained process put forward by the reality of generalised commodity exchange. He writes:

“The view that abstraction was not the exclusive-property of the mind, but arises in commodity exchange was first expressed by Marx in the beginning of *Capital* and earlier in the *Critique of Political Economy* of 1859, where he speaks of an abstraction other than that of thought” (I & M Labour: 19).

Sohn-Rethel extends the period of exchange abstraction to cover the whole historical era since ancient Greek antiquity. I quote:

“the formal structure of commodity exchange, in every single act, remains the same throughout the various stages of commodity production” (Sohn-Rethel 1978: 23).

“We have seen from our analysis that commodity exchange serves as a means of social synthesis only from Greek antiquity onwards” (op.cit. 58).

However, Marx conceived of value as a *historically specific social relation* characterising capitalism: Value is the “property” that products of labour acquire in capitalism, which is actualised in the market, through the exchangeability of any product of labour with any other, i.e. through their character as commodities bearing a specific (monetary) price on the market. From the *Grundrisse* (1857-8), to *Capital* (1867), Marx insisted that value is an expression of relations exclusively characteristic of the capitalist mode of production.

Thus, wherever in his work he speaks of “commodity production” in general so as to comprehend value, in reality he is shaping a preliminary intellectual construct, which will help him to come to grips with capitalist production, and subsequently to develop the concept of the CMP. The preliminary construct corresponds actually to the superficial “visible reality” of the capitalist economy. In 1858-59 he wrote:

“The simple circulation is, rather, an abstract sphere of the bourgeois process of production as a whole, which through its own determinations shows itself to be a moment, a mere form of appearance of some deeper process lying behind it, even resulting from it and producing it –industrial capital” (Karl Marx, “The Original Text of the second and the beginning of the third Chapter of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*” (MECW Vol. 29: 482 [MEGA II.2: 68-9; Urtext]).

The capitalist organisation of production and the resultant social division of labour is underpinned by the institutional independence of each individual producer, but also of every commodity owner (capitalist or labourer), from all the others. Nevertheless, all these individual production processes are linked indirectly together through the mechanism of the market. Each of them produces for exchange, with the purpose of acquiring a profit not lower than the average profit of the economy. This imposes an increasing social (capitalistic) uniformity on all individual productive activities, precisely through generalised commodity exchange and competition between individual capitalist production processes.

Only in the framework of capitalism, labour power becomes a commodity in a fully commercialized economy; generalized commodity ownership (including ownership of labour-power) and commodity production is the discernible feature of capitalism. The first volume of Marx's *Capital* begins with the following phrase:

“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” (Marx 1990: 125).

In capitalism, money becomes the general equivalent because it also functions as capital. As Marx writes:

“This circulation of money in turn leads to capital, hence can be fully developed only on the foundation of capital, just as, generally, only on this foundation can circulation seize hold of all moments of production” (Marx 1993: 776).

Marx has further analysed the capitalist relations of production and circulation in Vols. 2 & 3 of *Capital*. In his developed analysis, the place of capital is occupied by two sets of agents: the money capitalists and the functioning capitalists. In other words, the place of capital is occupied by agents that are both internal to the enterprise (managers), and external to it (security holders). Marx's general conception abolishes the basic distinction drawn by Keynes between the productive classes within the enterprise and the parasitical class of external rentiers. The contradictions that develop between managers and big investors certainly do exist but they evidently pertain to secondary aspects of the capital relation:

“In the production process, the functioning capitalist represents capital against the wage-labourers as the property of others, and the money capitalist participates in the exploitation of labour as represented by the functioning capitalist” (Marx 1991: 504).

Capital takes on a Janus-faced existence, as both a means of production and as financial securities (i.e. the equities and bonds etc. of an enterprise). In the circuit of money-capital, credit becomes the prevalent money form. As a consequence, argues Marx:

“[the] social character of capital is mediated and completely realised only by the full development of the credit and banking system” (Marx 1991: 742).

Only under these two preconditions, do all products of labour, including, first of all, those that concern the labourer’s remuneration, become commodities:

(a) that the worker becomes a commodity owner (of his/her labour-power) and

(b) that financial relations are being reified in the capital market and appear and function as sui generis commodities (bonds, securities, derivatives, etc.). Only under these two preconditions useful-concrete labour exists also as abstract labour. It is therefore only in this case that we may speak about exchange abstraction.

In pre-capitalist societies and more specifically in ancient Athens or Rome, commodity exchanges, money and finance forms remained embedded in the political, ideological and social structures pertaining to the prevailing in these societies relations of class exploitation and domination. And these prevailing relations were non-monetary in their inner structure: the coercive relation of master and slave in the ancient Greco-Roman household.

The only “entrepreneurial” activities in these societies, those of taskmasters utilising slave labour in order to produce, transport and trade commodities with the aim of creating monetary earnings, a production form which in my latest book in English I have named the “money-begetting slave mode of production” (Milios 2018), never became dominant in ancient Greece or Rome.

In the words of Aristotle, such a production process has:

“no limit to the end it seeks; and the end it seeks is wealth of the sort we have mentioned [...] the mere acquisition of currency [...] all who are engaged in acquisition increase their fund of money without any limit or pause” (cited by Meikle 1995: 59).

But, exactly for that reason, according to Aristotle this is an *unnatural xrematistike* (unnatural wealth making) because “of the means there is a limit, for the end is always the limit” (1257<sup>b</sup>28) (cited by Meikle 1995: 59).

“the most hated sort [...] is usury, which makes a gain out of money itself, and not from the natural object of it. For money was intended to be used in exchange, but not to increase at interest. [...] the offspring resembles the parent [...] of all modes of getting wealth this is the most unnatural (1258<sup>b</sup>1- 8) (cited by Meikle 1995: 63).

In ancient Greece and Rome, the non-monetary character of the dominant classic slave mode of production had as a consequence, as de Ste. Croix explains, that **8**“money income cannot be directly equated with income in kind from land for assessment purposes” (de Ste. Croix 2004: 41).

“A manufacturer or trader, even when the use of money became general, would simply not know what his ‘income’ or his ‘profits’ expressed in terms of drachmae were. This is one of the basic facts about the economy of the Greek world (and the Roman world) which many modern historians have entirely overlooked, because they persist, quite unconsciously, in conceiving the ancient economic systems in terms taken over directly from the modern or the medieval world” (de Ste. Croix 2004: 42-43).

In these societies, exchange value and money did not become universal, that is, it could not become the motivating force in the economy.

Finance in its commercialised, impersonal form was also absent from ancient societies.

There were, of course, forms of credit, but the low development of *productive* credit in the ancient world constrained the role of money to a medium of circulation and a treasure to be hoarded, as Scott Meikle, among others, has shown (Meikle 1995: 147-179).

The absence of inclusive capital and labour markets ruled out the possibility of exchange value becoming the regulating principle of the economy.

“There were no credit instruments of any kind, and each individual transaction was settled almost always by physical transfers in person, either by the principal himself or by an accredited agent. [...] There was no double-entry bookkeeping; notions of debit and credit were unknown; there was no accounting of debits and credits through strings of transactions to be settled at the end of a period, and there were no settlement days, quarterly or otherwise” (Meikle 1995 [*Aristotle’s Economic Thought*]: 160).

The subjugation of monetary relations to pre-capitalist social structures, and the prevalent position of politics maintained in ancient societies, resulted in economic relations and processes being perceived as issues of politics or ethics. As Marx stresses:

“Do we never find in antiquity an inquiry into which form of landed property etc. is the most productive, creates the greatest wealth? Wealth does not appear as the aim of production, although Cato may well investigate which manner of cultivating a field brings the greatest rewards, and Brutus may even lend out his money at the best rates of interest. The question is always which mode of property creates the best citizens” (Marx 1993: 487).

We may conclude, therefore, that “exchange abstraction” is a fruitful notion when applied to capitalism. Contrary to this, Sohn-Rethel blunts the notion of exchange abstraction by extending its historical duration to millennia and many different modes of production.

Sohn-Rethel mainly bases his analysis on Part I (the three first Chapters) of Vol. 1 of *Capital*, i.e., on the formula C-M-C, before Marx introduced the concept of capital. He confuses Marx’s preliminary concepts of value with his analysis of the CMP and conceives Marx’s text as an analysis of a supposedly broad historical era of social synthesis through commodity exchange.

I would like to juxtapose the above cited theses of Alfred Sohn-Rethel with two characteristic citations by Karl Marx:

“The concept of value is entirely peculiar to the most modern economy, since it is the most abstract expression of capital itself and of the production resting on it. In the concept of value, its secret is betrayed [...]. The economic concept of value does not occur in antiquity” (Marx 1993, 776 ff.).

“The ancient world, for which exchange value did not serve as the basis of production and which, on the contrary, collapsed in consequence of its development, produced a freedom and equality of a totally opposite and essentially no more than local content. On the other hand, since *moments* of the *simple* circulation were developed in the ancient world, among the free, at any rate, it is also clear that the definitions of juridical person, the subject of the process of exchange, were developed in Rome, especially in imperial Rome” (*MECW* Vol. 29: 475 [MEGA II.2: 60; Urtext]).

This second citation by Karl Marx reveals another inconsistency of Sohn-Rethel’s analysis, namely his understanding of conversion of the exchange abstraction into the conceptual abstraction:

“that the real abstraction operating in exchange engenders the ideal abstraction basic to Greek philosophy and to modern science” (Sohn-Rethel 1978: 28).

“the abstractness operating in exchange and reflected in value does nevertheless find an identical expression, namely the abstract intellect, or the so called ‘pure understanding’ - the cognitive source of scientific knowledge” (op.cit.: 34).

However, as said, the “social synthesis” of the ancient Greek world was not based on commodity exchange, but on the political edifice of a class of free land-owners, who were at the same time slave-owners. This ruling class of masters lived in the cities, and abstained from every kind of work, even that of management or overlooking of the production process. As Aristotle wrote:

“Whenever the masters are not compelled to plague themselves with supervision, the overseer assumes *this honour*, while the masters pursue public affairs or philosophy” (Aristotle, cited by Marx 1991: 509).

As Perry Anderson notes:

“Graeco-Roman Antiquity had always constituted a universe centred on cities. [...] The Graeco-Roman towns were [...], in origin and principle, urban congeries of land-owners. [...]; the surplus product that provided the fortunes of the possessing class could be extracted without its presence on the land” (Anderson 1974: 19-20, 23, 24).

It is characteristic that in ancient Athens non-citizens, either metics (i.e. foreigners who enjoyed a residence permit) or freedmen, exercised all forms of commerce and manufacture.

A social system, or a social synthesis is not solely commodity circulation; is not solely the economy; it also entails a specific state form and specific forms of concealment of class domination and exploitation (i.e. ruling ideology). And in contrast to capitalism, the cohesive element in ancient societies was not exchange or even the economy, but the polity, or the prevalence of the political over the sacred element: democracy and the political unity of the polis. As Marx writes:

“It is in each case the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the immediate producers [...] in which we find the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social edifice, and hence also the political form of the relationship of sovereignty and dependence” (Marx 1991: 927).

The specific difference of Marx’s problematic must be sought in the particular definition of the social whole. In other words, in the particular determination of the connection between economic, political and ideological power relations. The epistemology of Marx conceives science as a rupture

with pre-existing philosophical, ideological, religious etc. schemata, through a process of notion building, in the sense of a continuous refinement of the *concept* of the Real. Not a reflection of it in the mind, or a direct conversion of reality into a mode of thinking. In this framework, we cannot only comprehend “the socially necessary forms of cognition in any epoch” (Sohn-Rethel 1978: 57), but also to distinguish between science, philosophy, ideology and to decipher the specific contents of the ruling ideology.

From this viewpoint, capitalist ideology comprises heterogeneous totalities of practices that extend far beyond the fetishistic reification of the capital relation. It includes supposedly universal-emancipatory ideals (freedom, equality, democracy, solidarity, welfare), neutralized, of course, by capitalist institutions and the legal system. In the second place, ideological practices express ruling, providing direct legitimation for class differentiation (“meritocracy”, individuality, “law and order”) and other discriminatory elements such as nationalism, racism, sexism, etc.

Having said all the above, I may conclude that Alfred Sohn-Rethel’s notion of exchange abstraction is definitely fruitful, confined however to the modern society and economy, in other words to capitalism.