

On the bourgeois concept of real abstraction

For a non-dualistic ontology of capital

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While some theorists take up the term 'real abstraction' as shorthand for 'what Marx said about abstraction',¹ most of the work on 'real abstraction' over the last few decades uses the term to say something *more*. Contemporary Marxian theorists use 'real abstraction' to theorise gender,² Nature and Society,³ property and race,⁴ the bourgeois concept of social equality,⁵ State, money, and capital,⁶ the general intellect,⁷ natural slavery,⁸ the 'time of value',⁹ religion,¹⁰ and abstract labour,¹¹ to name a few examples. In each case, the term 'real abstraction' is invoked to elucidate the thing it describes. But what does it mean for something to be a 'real abstraction'? To what in these concepts does the term refer? What question does 'real abstraction' answer for us, what occluded process does it reveal?

As I will suggest below, these theorists use the term 'real abstraction' to elevate something beyond 'mere' material relations, enshrining it in an immaterial realm that structures and dominates our lives. As such, contemporary scholarship reifies the term 'real abstraction' in a way that brings in, through the back door, an ontological split between ideal and material. This dualism is ultimately Kantian – based on the ontological dualism between a 'here' (where we live) and 'there' (where the abstractions are). In fact, Alfred Sohn-Rethel (broadly agreed upon as the originator of the term 'real abstraction') explicitly seeded the concept of real abstraction with a Kantian ontological dualism – albeit a historicised, rather than transhistorical, one.

Furthermore, 'Real abstraction' as a concept obfuscates the relations it purports to describe. It inhibits the posing of deeper questions; instead of asking 'how

exactly is x phenomenon created and reproduced in or as capitalism, and how does it fit into the bigger system of the reproduction of capitalism' we are emboldened to say 'x is very powerful, because it is a real abstraction.'

Much extant criticism of the theory aims to correct Sohn-Rethel's origin story for real abstraction. Most famously, scholars such as Moishe Postone, Roberto Finelli and John Milios argue that Sohn-Rethel fallaciously locates the origin of real abstraction in exchange, when actually (they suggest) it originates in the capitalist production process and/or the abstraction of labour.¹² In a similar vein, Elena Louisa Lange points out that the 'praxis of exploitation' and the 'social nexus of production' drop swiftly out of Sohn-Rethel's analysis.¹³ From a different perspective, McLaughlin and Schlaudt postulate that real abstraction could have its origin in technology.¹⁴

Others criticise specific applications or emphases of real abstraction. For example, Kurz and Jappe argue that real abstraction refers specifically to abstract labour and money, respectively, rather than the panoply of social relations brought under the umbrella of real abstraction by other theorists. Jappe suggests that Sohn-Rethel rejects Marx's concept of abstract labour in favor of his own concept of real abstraction.¹⁵ O'Kane criticises many theorists of real abstraction on the basis that they eschew its 'subjective components' which occludes 'the experience of domination' and its 'shaping of subjectivity' – dynamics to which a new 'critical reading of real abstraction' should, on his account, be directed.¹⁶

Rather than questioning its misapplication or incorrect origin, in this essay I challenge the concept of

real abstraction itself. First I discuss contemporary uses of real abstraction, then I show through an exegetical reading of Sohn-Rethel, how the concept is built upon a Kantian ontology. I then suggest a way of reading abstraction without dualism. Many theorists using real abstraction do so in order to either (1) theorise oppressive social dynamics in capitalism, or (2) extend and enrich a value-form or *wertkritik* approach to understanding capital. Like some theorists of real abstraction, I share the ambition to understand categories such as gender, race, nature and the state via (in part) Marx's thought, and I am likewise committed to an analysis of capitalism that engages the contributions of value-form theory and *wertkritik*. My contention here is that using the term 'real abstraction' functions as a distraction or impediment to both of these avenues of inquiry.

On contemporary uses of 'real abstraction'

Abstraction qua abstraction is not bad. Insofar as abstraction is considered in terms of its etymological roots 'to draw away' or, according to Bhandar and Toscano, 'pulling out, extracting', abstraction is the mundane separation of an egg from the uterine lining, or the pull away from darkness of heliotropes. More often, we use abstraction to mean something akin to linguistic abstraction: words like 'tree', 'running', 'anxiety', 'pottery', are abstractions because they refer to something shared in common amidst multitudinous differences. These are ultimately 'mental abstractions', or in Kurz's words, 'CONCEPTUAL abstractions, i.e. mental achievements of the human mind that reflect something real in the mind.' As concepts, these abstractions can be judged as more or less 'right' or 'wrong' insofar as they correspond accurately or not to something in the world.¹⁷

Real abstraction, on the other hand, is meant to say something more than this. To say that a social relation 'morphs into a real abstraction' is to endow it with some further meaning beyond naming a common, consistent dynamic across variegated space and time.¹⁸ Value, supposedly, sits at a different level of abstraction than gravity.

Heinrich attempts to show that 'real abstractions' are distinct from 'mere abstractions' by highlighting the non-homology between 'abstract labour' and 'tree':

Abstract labor is not visible, only a particular concrete

labor is visible, just as the concept of 'tree' isn't visible: I'm only capable of perceiving a concrete botanical plant. As with the term 'tree', abstract labor is an abstraction, but a completely different kind of abstraction. Normally, abstractions are constituted in human thought. We refer to the commonalities among individual examples and then establish an abstract category, such as 'tree.' But in the case of abstract labor, we are not dealing with such a 'mental abstraction' but with a 'real abstraction', by which we mean an abstraction that is carried out in the actual behavior of humans, regardless of whether they are aware of it'.¹⁹

First, a good deal of human behaviour can be considered to induce abstractions, more or less consciously. Think: sex, sadism, generosity or friendship. We could argue that these are all abstractions that emerge from human praxis, and are to varying degrees obscured from conscious and intentional activity (one can be sadistic whether or not one is aware of the concept of 'sadism'). Especially any 'social form' can be considered as an abstraction carried out in 'the actual behavior of humans' – Freud's incest taboo, totalitarianism and marriage can all easily be described as such.

Second, properly speaking, 'real abstraction' is a 'mental abstraction' in exactly the same way that 'tree' is a mental abstraction. After all, the abstraction 'tree' – insofar as it refers to some qualities such as requiring sunlight, nutrients and water, or having a main thick stem often called a trunk – is carried out in the actual existence and reproduction of those individual living things-we-call-trees. Tree is the mental abstraction based on these processes, patterns, relationships. 'Value', 'abstract labour' and 'real abstraction' are mental abstractions in the same sense: they allow us to name certain consistent processes, patterns, relationships. The question is, does 'real abstraction' refer to something qualitatively different than 'tree'?

Kurz argues that it does. He writes that real abstraction refers to something which is itself abstract, and thus represents a 'doubling of abstraction'. In this, his is one of the most explicit and coherent attempts to define 'real abstraction'. Kurz argues that abstraction of value is fundamentally different to that of 'tree' or 'animal' because a general 'tree' or general 'animal' does not 'actually' 'exist', whereas 'value' *does*.²⁰

Or does it? Here, I want to suggest that the only sense in which 'value' could be an abstraction of a dif-

ferent, ‘doubled’ sort than ‘tree’, is if there is a different ontological realm in which abstract labour and value operate – an ‘immaterial realm’, ‘noumenal plane’, ‘socialus spatium’, ‘realm of consciousness’. (Otherwise, value is merely the actual material/concrete processes of value reproduction and realisation, and there is no ‘doubling’ of abstraction.) And lo, it is upon this very basis that Sohn-Rethel forged the concept of real abstraction – on a historicised, but nonetheless transcendental ontological dualism (I will address this in Part 3, below).

The most common features of the contemporary definitions of real abstraction are as follows:

(a) real abstractions arise from actual concrete human activity rather than anyone’s mental faculties; hence the existence of real abstractions does not depend on whether or not humans are aware of them.

As we have seen, Heinrich describes real abstraction as ‘an abstraction that is carried out in the actual behavior of humans, regardless of whether they are aware of it’.²¹ In Fineschi’s words, this conceptualisation of real abstraction is likewise ‘an abstraction that is not posited by thought, but the result of a practical process’.²² Lange suggests that real abstraction does not originate in thought, ‘but in human activity itself’, and is ‘obscured from the conscious and intentional activity of the participants of the exchange process’.²³ While Elbe suggests that ‘Real abstraction means that the general attribute of acts of labor of being human labor as such, in and through exchange, obtains – without the conscious intervention of those engaging in exchange – the specific significance of being the social form of private acts of labor’.²⁴

(b) real abstractions, while abstract, act upon the world, and have great power to do so. They are also particularly difficult to affect/destroy/dismember through human activity.

Real abstractions wield uncanny power over humans in much contemporary literature – Soren Mau writes, ‘capitalist society is ruled by social relations morphed into real abstractions’, which involves the transformation of certain relations into a ‘quasi-autonomous system’ which imposes itself through ‘an impersonal and abstract form of domination’.²⁵ Here, real abstractions are strong enough to maintain a level of autonomy (from our actions upon them, we presume) and dominate us with an inhuman power. Toscano similarly writes that

real abstraction dominates society ‘by an empty reality principle’,²⁶ while Jason Moore describes real abstractions as having ‘operative force in the material world’.²⁷ Elbe notes that real abstraction’s validity as a concept is proven by the ‘increasing uncontrollable capitalist mode of production that almost completely takes hold of individuals’.²⁸

For Bonefeld, ‘In capitalism, Man is ruled by economic abstractions over which he has no control ... The term real abstraction articulates the vanishing appearance of Man as an embodiment of the ghost-walking economic categories’.²⁹ Bonefeld’s words epitomise the affect that dominates writings on real abstraction. Without doubt, many parts of capitalism can appear as cold, impersonal, empty and overwhelming. Some of us need to be shaken into awareness of this complex and powerful system, and sometimes it is through these vivid descriptors that we can get there. At the same time, we must remain wary of the way such mystical and beguiling categories might come to occlude an accurate understanding of the world.

There is a problem, for example, if we come to consider real abstractions to be acting subjects in their own right – Fineschi writes of theories of real abstraction: ‘In general terms, one of the most important focuses is that, in capitalism, abstractions become real and work in the system as acting subjects’.³⁰ Toscano goes so far as to suggest that this type of real abstraction is the *differenzia specifica* of capitalism (although Fineschi argues the contrary).³¹

Three central problems arise from these features. First, in insisting that real abstractions are neither an action of the mind, nor are they material, these theorists (wittingly or no) invoke an ontological dualism between matter and ‘the abstract’ that approximates a Kantian divide between phenomena and noumena. As in most ontological divides, one side of the dualism – here, the realm of ‘the abstract’ – wields extraordinary, even quasi-supernatural powers. Consequently, the abstract both dictates the structure of our lives, and is particularly unyielding to the influence of intentional material/concrete human activity. This shows that the first premise (a) tends to yield to the second; (b) ontological dualism tends to imply the existence of supernatural power. Marx and Engels famously invoke the supernatural in the *Communist Manifesto*, analogising bourgeois society

to a 'sorcerer' and capitalist production to the 'powers of the netherworld' in a clear attempt to impress upon the reader the sheer strength and vast powers of capitalism.³² While metaphor and poetry are essential to the project of apprehending the totality of what we must destroy, we cannot forget that Marx's critique of the *fetish* is also a critique of worshipping processes that have been reified into conceptual objects which possess magical powers.

Reification and fetishisation of the concept of 'real abstraction' is the second major problem arising from the contemporary use of the term. When we say that certain phenomena become 'real abstractions', this quickly comes to mean that they turn into a specific sort of thing which acts in a specific way. This formulation can mislead and/or cut short inquiry into the topics it is meant to elucidate. For example, if we find the capitalist state form to be deleterious, hooked into capitalist production at every juncture, and almost unimaginable to dislodge, and we decide to label it a 'real abstraction', we can attribute its durability, strength and seductive force to its nature as a 'real abstraction' rather than inquiring into the actual material processes which consistently render it strong, dynamic and self-justifying.

Third, once real abstraction has been reified as a concept, insisting on the 'impersonality' and 'emptiness' of real abstractions becomes axiomatic, apparently needing little explanation or justification – it is *in the nature* of the realm of abstraction. Mau's now infamous concept of 'mute compulsion' is a theory of capitalism as the domination of real abstractions, and emphasises its 'mute'-ness, its impersonality, emptiness, etc. For Mau, impersonal power is distinguished from 'personal relations of dependence' because people are bound 'to capital as such, not to a particular capitalist.'³³ This is drawn from Marx's statement that

The worker leaves the capitalist to whom he hires himself whenever he likes, and the capitalist discharges him whenever he thinks fit, as soon as he no longer gets any profit out of him, or not the anticipated profit. But the worker, whose sole source of livelihood is the sale of his labour, cannot leave the whole class of purchasers, that is, the capitalist class, without renouncing his existence. He belongs not to this or that bourgeois, but to the bourgeoisie, the bourgeois class, and it is his business to dispose of himself, that is to find a purchaser within this bourgeois class.³⁴

Similarly, Postone names the categories of 'the commodity' and 'value' as expressing 'impersonal social forms'. He writes: 'Capitalism is a system of abstract, impersonal domination. Relative to earlier social forms, people appear to be independent; but they actually are subject to a system of social domination that seems not social but "objective".'³⁵

Concepts of emptiness and impersonality evoke some important realities of capitalism. However, insofar as *impersonal* domination refers to people being exploited and dominated by an abstract capitalist class instead of particular individuals or cohorts, this is only the general condition of the most affluent echelons of the global proletariat. To the majority of the people of the world under its control, capital's domination is vicious and acute, attending to particularities of people who are being exploited. If capitalism demanded and produced modern chattel slavery and the Atlantic slave trade,³⁶ if precarious immigrant labour forces are strategically produced to fill labour needs where working conditions are vile, life-shortening, and shielded from labour laws,³⁷ these all require an actual personalisation within the 'emptiness' of value, a relentless discrimination and reproduction of heirarchised difference within the often-forced process of abstract labour – an immanent, unstoppable force of racialisation. Furthermore, the systematic oppression, repression, sexual abuse and conscription into relations of psychic, physical and emotional subordination of feminised people, grounded as it is between the capitalist separation of the spheres of 'work' and 'non-work', is a guarantee that the majority of feminised individuals will be subjected to extremely personal violences throughout the duration of their lives.

Capital forces a hierarchy between the people who live in luxury, who live on the edge of luxury, who live in unyielding stress and destitution, who live in ethnic cleansing and constant war. Between people who can expect social recognition, respect, bodily autonomy and care, and those who can expect social diminution, exclusion, death, rape and negligence. Capital and capitalists 'care' about creating these different groups, insofar as they *need to and do so*. Capital would not 'be happy' for everyone to be equal, unracialised, ungendered, content automatons. This would disable superprofits, the acceleration of value extraction, increases in ground rent extraction, and any number of other holy grails that guide

the activities of the capitalist and landowning classes.

In Bhandar and Toscano's 'Race, real estate, and real abstraction', they outline capitalist property relations and race as two of many possible 'real abstractions'. Their goal is to use the framework of Althusser's and Hall's 'articulation' to show that capitalist property and race are deeply entangled ('articulated'), even though, on their reading, capitalist property is inherent to capitalist social relations, and race is not.³⁸ This enables them to think through the deep connections between race and property – noting for example, that the 'racial anthropology of the human is smuggled into the ontological grounding of the possessive individual.'

Bhandar and Toscano aim to address the question of 'how capitalist property relations preserve and rely upon',³⁹ in Stuart Hall's words, 'other relations that are not ascribable within the "social relations of production"' (meaning: how capitalist property relations preserve and rely upon race even when race it is not inherent to the capitalist mode of production). To do so, they take these 'other relations' (here, race) and elevate them to 'real abstractions' alongside the real abstraction of property. Once this is achieved, a process of 'articulation' can be posited as uniting them in mutual reproduction.

What do we gain in our analysis of race and property by saying that they are real abstractions? Setting aside the possibility that race is in fact inherent to capitalist social relations (an avenue of inquiry that I find much more fruitful), surely we can approach the question of how race and capitalist property are related to one another without having to impose the concept of 'real abstraction' upon them. All of the creative theoretical work Bhandar and Toscano do in the paper does not properly *require* this use of real abstraction. However, this method of dubbing certain social relations 'real abstractions' has the unintended effect of reifying them – truly thing-ifying them. Hence, in their conclusion, Bhandar and Toscano state that 'it seems that justice might require a disarticulation of the fetishes produced by racial and propertied abstractions.'⁴¹

But racial and propertied abstractions do not 'produce fetishes'; they *are* fetishes. Insofar as 'racial and propertied abstractions' are considered as 'real abstractions' which act upon us, they are themselves fetishes thrown up by larger processes. To say that 'racial abstraction' causes racial violence, for example, is to mystify the

fact that complex material processes of racialisation – enacted by individuals, groups, institutions, to name but a few scales of analysis – cause and enact racist violence.

Similarly, to say that the value form does this or that mystifies, to a certain degree, the fact that the consequences of the value form are consequences not of a mystical immaterial force, but of real material structures and processes that we comprehend through a study of the abstract concept of the value form as a social relation.

Let us consider Bhandar and Toscano's quotation of Gilmore:

'Racism', writes Ruth Wilson Gilmore, 'is a practice of abstraction, a death-dealing displacement of difference into hierarchies that organise relations within and between the planet's sovereign political territories'. Processes of abstraction, Gilmore notes, figure humans in relation to inhuman persons in a hierarchy that produces the totalising category of the 'human being'.⁴²

Of course racialisation is a process which 'abstracts' certain physical or cultural qualities from people and elevates them to levels of importance in categorising different groups. Specific abstracted traits become central to how people understand hierarchical racial categories. But the violence of this is not in the process of abstraction itself. As mentioned above, any 'process' which has consistent effects across space and time will be unthinkable without mobilising our faculty of 'abstraction', and of considering that process 'abstracted' from any one specific context. As such, race is not more abstract than respiration, music or weaving. The problem of racism is not that it abstracts, but rather, the 'death-dealing displacement of difference into hierarchies that organise relations within and between the planet's sovereign political territories.'

In sum, the contemporary use of 'real abstraction' invokes an ontological dualism that impedes critical inquiry into the capitalist mode of production. In the following section, I will excavate the development of this dualism in Sohn-Rethel's development of the concept of real abstraction. As we go, I also want to keep in mind that when we are swayed by the mysticism embodied by the term 'real abstraction' we stop asking *what are the processes which the mental abstraction 'value' names?* What are the processes which the mental abstraction 'gender' names? What are the processes which the mental abstraction 'race' names?

Sohn Rethel: Anti-Kantian Kantianism

As many have noted, Alfred Sohn-Rethel, rather than Marx, originated and developed the concept of 'real abstraction', which pushes into an increasingly wide field of Marxian subdisciplines today.⁴³ Though most writers agree that Marx never used the term 'real abstraction', many argue that a concept *akin* to that of real abstraction was *at work* in Marx's theories. Mau, for example, states that real abstraction is 'clearly visible' in Marx's writing even though he doesn't use the term.⁴⁴ Jappe insists that 'the concept – if not the word – is present, and is absolutely crucial in [Marx's] writings'.⁴⁵

I turn to Sohn-Rethel to explore real abstraction's early development in the marxian lexicon. But rather than give a holistic assessment of Sohn-Rethel's theory, I want to highlight the fact that his concept of real abstraction is defined by a Kantian ontological dualism between thought and matter (the abstract and the concrete).⁴⁶ (Some argue that Marx himself imposes such a dualism in his theory of value, but I will argue in section 4 that this need not be our interpretation.)

To name something a 'real abstraction' is, too often, to consider it sorcery. 'Real abstraction' answers our confusion with recourse to a mystical 'other' place where abstractions live. As such, real abstraction is the distilled example of a practice that goes far beyond the use of that specific term; many theorists effect the same manoeuvre – offshoring the explanation of something vast and complex to an 'immaterial' realm – with other conceptual tools.⁴⁷

Ironically, Sohn-Rethel orients his book on real abstraction around a critique of Kant. Kant functions as Sohn-Rethel's conceptual foil, representing the *pure bourgeois perspective* in the field of epistemology. This enables Sohn-Rethel, in his own terms, to treat Kant's work in a similar way to how Marx treats Adam Smith's interventions into the field of political economy. Sohn-Rethel convincingly shows that Smith and Kant both elaborate 'a coherent, all-embracing ideology to suit the production relations of bourgeois society',⁴⁸ marking them both as high philosophical defenders of capitalism. Sohn-Rethel considers Smith's 1776 *Wealth of Nations* and Kant's 1781 *Critique of Pure Reason* to be 'above all others, the two works which, in completely unconnected

fields and in total systematic independence from each other, strive towards the same goal: to prove the perfect normalcy of bourgeois society.'⁴⁹ Kant's theory of science is

the classical manifestation of the bourgeois fetishism of intellectual labour ... Kant might at his time have been introduced to an English public as the Adam Smith of epistemology, and at the same period Smith could have been recommended to a German audience as the Immanuel Kant of political economy.⁵⁰

Thus, Sohn-Rethel considers his critique of Kant's epistemology as analogous to Marx's critique of Adam Smith's political economy. As Marx showed of Adam Smith's work, Sohn-Rethel hopes to reveal, through this project of uncovering the assumptions and fetishes of bourgeois philosophical epistemology, essential truths about Capital.

Sohn-Rethel considers Kant's fundamental fallacy to be his transhistorical account of the division between the material and ideal. Comparable to Adam Smith's treatment of the categories of a capitalist economy as transhistorical, Kant elevates this division of ideal and empirical realms to transhistorical truth – there is no beginning to the division, and so, conveniently, there is no end. This division between realms is fundamental, ontological, eternal. Sohn-Rethel argues that 'Kant was driven to this conclusion because he could not imagine that non-empirical concepts could possibly have natural or historical, or in any case spatio-temporal, roots.'⁵¹ The fact that Kant could *not imagine* the material production of non-empirical concepts is, according to Sohn-Rethel, the result of the same material processes which give rise to the division in the first place. This resembles Adam Smith's treatment of homo economicus as transhistorical.

Sohn-Rethel argues, contra Kant, that the division between the conceptual and the empirical is generated by the social act of exchange. Exchange, here, is a historical rather than a permanent feature of human social life, emerging at specific moments in time and growing to dominance. Specifically, argues Sohn-Rethel, when exchange moves beyond an act occurring between societies or groups, and becomes an intra-societal activity performed by individuals with other individuals, it instigates a particular cognitive process amongst these exchanging individuals which is qualitatively dissimilar to all others,

which becomes the faculty of *cognitive abstraction*.

Sohn-Rethel's notion of *cognitive abstraction* is important – it is not the mere use of abstract terms or concepts (for all language functions on a level of abstraction, where for instance the term 'bird' comes to refer to a complex multitude of beings). In fact, Sohn-Rethel suggests that there are 'levels of abstraction' (a common form of expression in marxian thought today), and as these levels ascend, at some point mental labour attains 'intellectual independence which severs it inherently from manual labour without the need of caste divisions or mystifications.'⁵²

Thus, for example, while some mathematics are possible before the development of this intellectual independence, a *theorem* 'lies on a level of abstraction too high for [some] kind of "mathematics".' For example, the practice of rope-stretching in Ancient Egypt does not ascend to the level of theorems, even though it certainly 'gets the job done', according to Sohn-Rethel. The proto-abstract forms of mathematics such as those of Ancient Egypt are characterised by 'the lack of the logical foundation and systematic coherence by which it later assumes its intrinsic division from manual labour.'⁵³ These forms cannot reach higher levels of abstraction because generalised exchange – the origin of intellectually independent abstractions – remains absent in this historical period.

Sohn-Rethel's eurocentrism here becomes even more obvious when he names the work of Bronze-age Egypt and Syria 'proto-intellectual' while the activity of the Greeks (claimed by the West as its progenitor) establishes 'real intellect'.⁵⁴ Sohn-Rethel gives additional depth to the white supremacist map of human progress forged in colonialism and solidified in the history of Western Philosophy through Kant and Hegel (among others). This white supremacist geography grounds the concept of real abstraction – something which cannot be considered irrelevant to its contemporary use.

Only the onset of capitalist social relations can instigate the formal rift between mental and manual labour, according to Sohn-Rethel. So long as the economic context could 'be likened to that of a huge state household',⁵⁵ the act of exchange had not yet taken a central enough place in society to begin to develop a purer expression of cognitive abstraction.⁵⁶

With this historical narrative (that takes cues, con-

sciously or not, from Hegel's racist and paternalistic Lectures on the Philosophy of History), Sohn-Rethel replaces Kant's transhistorical account of the metaphysical realm of pure ideas with his own historical-material genesis story of that metaphysical realm. Sohn-Rethel considers this move to be a 'liquidation' of Kant's 'critical dualism' between thought and matter. Sohn-Rethel considers his approach superior to Hegel's resolution of the dualism, in which thought and matter 'perform a process' together.⁵⁷ But here we must note that Sohn-Rethel's approach does not liquidate the dualism between thought and matter, it *historicises it*; the *reality* of that dualism, in Sohn-Rethel's account, is shored up. Here, Sohn-Rethel betrays his own goal of treating Kant as Marx treated Adam Smith, for while Marx aptly shows that *homo economicus* does not exist, and is merely an appearance, Sohn-Rethel alleges that a mind-body dualism does in fact exist as a result of generalised commodity exchange. And it is here in this dualism that real abstraction emerges, historically.

And so, real abstraction as a concept ensures the continued reification of distinct ideal and material realms. What's more, 'real abstraction' gives those realms a means of communication. Kant's system invoked the human faculty of thought as a potential connection between the noumenal and phenomenal realms, and here real abstraction similarly offers a means by which the two realms are connected; real abstraction is immaterial but borne from material-concrete human activity, and has the power to then act upon the material-concrete world, dominating and controlling people. Furthermore, real abstraction is the ground for the pure human intellect, which conceivably functions for Sohn-Rethel in some similar ways as it does for Kant.

Thus, despite articulating a set of convincing arguments that dethrone the Kantian dualism, Sohn-Rethel retains a *real*, if historically emergent and materially produced, division between thought and matter. Sohn-Rethel denotes this dualism in the old German style – as First Nature and Second Nature. Sohn-Rethel tells us that while certain concepts and notions – for instance, the individual private intellect – are fetish-concepts produced by the exchange abstraction, the existence of a second nature, separate from the first, is *real*.

But are not first and second nature also 'fetishes'? They do not describe something real so much as affirm an appearance, an 'illusion in human consciousness' to

use Isaak Rubin's words, thrown up by material processes. Sohn-Rethel does not appear to consider the actual non-distinction between the empirical world and abstract cognition. Thus, he appears to fall into the same trap to which he confines Hegel, who

could not himself step out of the bourgeois world of his epoch, and so he attained the unity outreaching Kant only by dispensing with the epistemological critique, and hence by way of hypostasis. He did not *make* 'thinking' and 'being' one, and did not enquire how they would be one. He simply argued that the idea of truth *demands* them to be one, and if logic is to be the logic of the truth it has to start with that unity, as its presupposition.⁵⁸

This passage, early on in the book, seems to indicate Sohn-Rethel's commitment to making 'thinking' and 'being' one, but in fact he affirms them as *two*, albeit one originating in the other; and albeit temporarily two, rather than transhistorically two.

In order to *make* thinking and being one, instead of letting them play out as one process, Sohn-Rethel finds a story, a history, of their coming-into-being-as-two. Ultimately their coming into being is resolved in their eventual collapse (ostensibly concomitant to a communist revolution), and the temporary nature of their bifurcation is what proves their unity.

But why this historicisation rather than a straightforward claim of the transhistorical nondistinction between abstract thought and matter? More Kantian than he could admit, and caught in the same trap as Kant who could not conceive of abstraction arising empirically, Sohn-Rethel could not conceive there to be *no real ontological dualism whatsoever* in the world he knew.⁵⁹ Thus he argues that a material social process has the capacity to, in itself, give rise to a separate ontological plane, but offers no ontological ground on which such a thing could make sense. The ontological dualism is a given:

The duality of sources of knowledge we accept as an incontrovertible fact. The question we ask is, what is the historical origin of our logical ability to construct mathematical hypotheses and the elements contributing to them?⁶⁰

But: the two spheres do not actually exist in reality as separate, just as commodities do not really emerge smoothly and cleanly of their own volition onto the Walmart shelves. The oddity is that the two spheres appear

to 'really' exist – not, as Sohn-Rethel argues, that the two spheres are historically determined. Their *fetish* is historically determined.

Rubin writes that eventually, 'Illusion and error in men's minds transform reified economic categories into "objective forms" (of thought) of production relations of a given, historically determined mode of production – commodity production'.⁶¹ Thus, with Kant, we observe the fabulous examples of the increasingly reified categories of thought and matter incarnating into pure and purely separated realms. The problem is not, as Sohn-Rethel argues, that Kant neglects to account for the emergence of this division, but that Kant takes the division, which is an illusion, as real. Sohn-Rethel proceeds to accept and reify these illusions in a different way, preserving them from true liquidation as 'real abstractions'.

Abstraction without dualism

While many interpret Marx's words on abstraction, abstract labour and value, as supporting this Sohn-Rethelian concept of real abstraction, I believe real abstraction reintroduces an idealism that Marx was trying to demystify, a dualism he abandoned early on in life. I share V. A. Martin's assessment of Marx, that 'in his own field of research during his maturity – political economy – Marx managed to overcome the dichotomy that opposed real to metaphysical objects, a dichotomy that goes back to Plato'.⁶² And Marx did not overcome this by the Hegelian trick of, pace Sohn-Rethel, making the two 'perform a process'. Rather, he denied a separate, operative realm where ideal objects ('real abstractions') acted as subjects. Here, I'd like to consider how to read abstraction and abstract processes in a non-dualistic way. What is 'abstract' about our abstractions is the fact that they refer to complex patterns of repeating processes amidst widely different geographies, peoples and times. In other words, 'social relation', like 'process' and 'motion', are patterns immanent to matter, not immaterial forms which exist apart from matter.

Birds in a flock of millions move and dart together in complex patterns. Abstract labour differs from the flight patterns of birds not because the former is abstract while the latter is not. 'Abstract labour' refers to a pattern of human behaviour that pulls in, impacts and transforms an astonishing breadth of living and non-living beings

and relations the world over – moreover, it does so to the devastation of the vast majority and the enrichment of a few. As such, ‘abstract labour’ is quantitatively distinct from ‘flight patterns’,⁶³ and it is more germane to any movement towards liberation, peace and collective well-being. However, we cannot say one is a real abstraction and the other is not.

The backdrop to a non-dualistic, non-idealistic understanding of the capitalist mode of production would be a Spinozist monism – or an Einsteinian physics, which is the same. Sohn-Rethel was unable, or unwilling, to consider such a challenge to Kant’s dualism. An elaboration of such a system and how it may ground Marx’s critique of capitalism is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, I will discuss several points in the critique of capitalism that are often interpreted through Kantian (or Hegelian) dualism, and how we can offer an alternative, monist reading.

In his introduction to Galileo’s ‘Dialogue Concerning the Two World Systems’, Einstein notes that he and Galileo both worked to reject hypotheses that introduced a conceptual object that transcended the material but acted upon it.⁶⁴ He noted that transcendence is ‘not exactly inadmissible from a purely logical point of view’, but, we can add, its logical coherence depends on ontological dualism.

But then, what is abstract labour, or value, if not something supersensible, immaterial? Marx writes:

To measure the exchange-value of commodities by the labor-time they contain, the different kinds of labor have to be reduced to uniform, homogeneous, simple labor, in short to labor of uniform quality, whose only difference, therefore, is quantity. This reduction appears to be abstraction, but it is an abstraction which is made every day in the social process of production... This abstraction, human labor in general, exists in the form of average labor which, in a given society, the average person can perform ...⁶⁵

Familiar as we are with Marx’s assertion that labour has *two* aspects, concrete and abstract, Marx offers little to elucidate the meaning of this split-into-two. Marx also is not particularly concerned to conceptualise in detail the ontology implied in the process of labour splitting into its abstract and concrete qualities – he does not give us, you might say, a clear ontological understanding of what this means. However we can learn something from

his description of the abstract. And here we find that ‘abstract’ need not mean ‘immaterial’ in Marx.

Marx describes the emergence of an object as a commodity as a moment in which ‘it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness.’⁶⁶ Rather than interpreting this as the emergence of an abstract supra-sensible realm, consider that this could mean merely that the commodity-form of an object *bears no relation* to the material particularities of that object.



The commodity character of a thing – say, a wooden chair – is not based on an atom of its own matter. It is not found in the wood or the nails, nor in their particular arrangement as wrought by their maker(s). The sensuousness of the specific chair is, in a sense, ‘transcended’, but only by larger material processes, NOT by something immaterial. The chair’s commodity character is not immaterial – it is based on the real, material relationships of the production and circulation and exchange of that chair (which involve necessarily the totality of social relations that compose capitalism, as its nature is to irrevocably imbricate every thing and person in that totality), all of which operate in and as ponderable matter (and perhaps, as Einstein would have added, fields).

These material relationships become *more important* to its social character than the wood and nails comprising the thing's 'own body', because these larger processes are what determines which chair will get created – and where, and how – more than any maker, any wood or any nail.

Abstract labour, for its part, is abstract insofar as it produces value. What does this mean? This is *short-hand for a whole system*. To say abstract labour produces value is to say that it is happening in capitalism, that it is waged work, and that its products will be commodities that enter the sphere of circulation. To say labour is abstract is to refer to its embeddedness in (inextricability from) a larger process which exceeds the given labour in space and in time.

To say labour is abstract is to note that it produces commodities for the market and it is organised within a larger system of wage labour. Its abstractness refers to the qualities pertaining to any specific instance of labouring which connect it to the whole of the capitalist mode of production. But does the abstractness of abstract labour mean it transcends this material, phenomenal realm? No. This additional ontological level is unnecessary for the concepts to function in a rich and provocative description of the system – and, in fact, to impose ontological dualism weakens the analysis, for it offloads an important dynamic of our world onto another, literally untouchable realm of being.

What of value? What is it to say that value is abstract? Value is the quality of commodity production which brings together its disparate parts – to say it is 'congealed labour time' doesn't clarify much here. Value is not a material substance like ice, snow, blood or beans, but the name of one aspect of a process. Value represents the fact that a person has worked for some amount of time in this death-dealing global system. It is the name for the product of (abstract) labour. It is a measurement we can take of capitalist exploitation. It is not an immaterial substance, any more than centimetres are immaterial substances.

Abstraction can also describe some of the consequences of the existence of abstract labour's production of commodities as a system – for example, to the 'abstract' social life of commodities which only occurs because of the value that they hold – in common.⁶⁷

The objectivity of commodities as values differs from

Dame Quickly in the sense that 'a man knows not where to have it'. 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 objects. We may twist and turn a single commodity as we wish; it remains impossible to grasp it as a thing possessing value. However, let us remember that commodities possess an objective character as values only in so far as they are all expressions of an identical social substance, human labour, that their objective character as values is therefore purely social. From this it follows self-evidently that it can only appear in the social relation between commodity and commodity.⁶⁸

Atoms of matter *of the commodity* do not enter into value composition – but this does not mean value is immaterial or ontologically separate from matter any more than gravity exists in a separate sphere of existence from falling rain. Gravity is a force which is *in and of matter*, and value is no less so. Here, value manifests in the social relations of commodities – social relations which themselves do not transcend matter but occur in matter. To say that value exists and that it is abstract, then, is to use shorthand to refer to the complex totality of capitalist social relations.

To be sure, value is so strange and complex a system that we have yet to fully comprehend it (and likely won't until long after we destroy it), which can tempt us to ascribe to it a spectral or mystical substance. Such metaphors and allusions can drive home the real vastness and permeation of value into all human life (such that 'human life' itself is a concept inextricable from value). If you had to describe the Grand Canyon to someone who had never seen it, you may say something more than its metric measurements. So, we may both forgive and appreciate those authors whose poetic nuancing of the concept of value has assisted us in grasping it more fully.

However, poetry notwithstanding, value is the product of wage labour in a capitalist system, and all the things that this entails. Value is *not* an ontologically distinct, 'abstract' substance, existing in some other plane of reality, birthed into that plane by the demonic machinations of capital. Value – like gravity – is a conceptual representation of a complex process that is difficult for all of us to comprehend.

To repeat: value is not an object, but a process. Many have said this, but the implication I emphasise here is this: if value is not an object, but a process (or set of

processes) it cannot be a ‘real abstraction’, insofar as this term is commonly understood to refer to something immaterial.⁶⁹ Everything that creates value happens here, in this world, and is explainable within it, without need for reference to a wicked Narnia where a white queen of value coordinates our realm through her interdimensional spyglass.

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Notes

1. Gianluca Pozzoni, ‘Chapter 11: Real Abstraction’, in *Marx: Key Concepts* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2024). Thanks to O. L. Silverman, Caitlin Manning, and Nader Hasan for their excellent critiques and suggestions on the following essay.
2. Maya Gonzalez and Jeanne Neton, ‘The Logic of Gender’, *Endnotes* 3 (2013).
3. Jason W. Moore, ‘Nature/Society & The Violence of Real Abstraction’, (2016), accessed 14 July 2025, <https://jasonwmoore.wordpress.com/2016/10/04/naturesociety-the-violence-of-real-abstraction/>.
4. Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano, ‘Race, Real Estate and Real Abstraction’, *Radical Philosophy* 194 (Nov-Dec, 2015), 8–17.
5. Werner Bonefeld, ‘On Capital as Real Abstraction’ in *Marx and Contemporary Critical Theory: The Philosophy of Real Abstraction*, eds. Antonio Oliva, Ángel Oliva and Iván Novara (Cham: Springer, 2020), 159.
6. Roberto Fineschi, ‘Real Abstraction: Philological Issues’, in *Marx and Contemporary Critical Theory*, 71.
7. Paolo Virno, ‘General Intellect’ in *Lessico postfordista Dizionario di idee della mutazione*, eds. Adelino Zanini and Ubaldo Fadini (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2002).
8. Sara-Maria Sorentino, ‘Natural Slavery, Real Abstraction, and the Virtuality of Anti-Blackness’, *Theory and Event* 22:3 (2019), 632.
9. Bonefeld, ‘On Capital as Real Abstraction’, 153–70.
10. Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (London: Verso, 2010).
11. Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx’s Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012).
12. Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); John Milios, ‘Value Form and Abstract Labor in Marx: A Critical Review of Alfred Sohn-Rethel’s Notion of “Real Abstraction”’, in *Marx and Contemporary Critical Theory*, 25–39.
13. Elena Louisa Lange, ‘Real Abstraction’, in *The Sage Handbook of Marxism*, eds. Beverley Skeggs et al. (London: Sage, 2022), 593–608.
14. Peter McLaughlin and Oliver Schlaudt, ‘Real Abstraction in the History of the Natural Sciences’, in *Marx and Contemporary Critical Theory*, 311.
15. Anselm Jappe, ‘Sohn-Rethel and the Origin of “Real Abstraction”: A Critique of Production or a Critique of Circulation?’, *Historical Materialism* 21:1 (2013), 3–14.
16. Chris O’Kane, ‘The Critique of Real Abstraction: From the Critical Theory of Society to the Critique of Political Economy and Back Again’ in *Marx and Contemporary Critical Theory*, 281–82.
17. Robert Kurz, ‘Abstrakte Arbeit und Sozialismus’, *Marxistische Kritik* 4 (Dez. 1987).
18. Søren Mau, *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Theory of the Economic Power of Capital* (London: Verso, 2023).
19. Michael Heinrich, *An Introduction to the Three Volumes of Karl Marx’s Capital*, trans. Alex Locascio (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012).
20. Kurz, ‘Abstrakte Arbeit’.
21. Heinrich, *An Introduction*.
22. Roberto Fineschi, ‘Real Abstraction: Philological Issues’, in *Marx and Contemporary Critical Theory*, 62.
23. Lange, ‘Real Abstraction’.
24. Ingo Elbe, ‘Reification and Real Abstraction in Marx’s Critique of Political Economy’, in *Marx and Contemporary Critical Theory*, 255.
25. Mau, *Mute Compulsion*, 82.
26. Alberto Toscano, ‘The Open Secret of Real Abstraction’, *Rethinking Marxism* 20:2 (2008), 277.
27. Moore, ‘Nature/Society’.
28. Elbe, ‘Reification’, 249.
29. Bonefeld, ‘On Capital as Real Abstraction’, 154.
30. Fineschi, ‘Real Abstraction’, 70.
31. Toscano, ‘Open Secret’, 273; Fineschi, ‘Real Abstraction’.
32. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *Marx and Engels Collected Works, Volume 6, 1845–1848* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 489.
33. Mau, *Mute Compulsion*, 136.
34. Karl Marx, *Wage Labour and Capital*, in *Collected Works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, 1849, Vol. 9: The Journalism and Speeches of the Revolutionary Years in Germany* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 203.
35. Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 125.
36. See, for example, Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2018); and Karl Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy*, in *Marx/Engels Collected Works*, vol. 6 (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 167.

37. Exemplified in Mostafa Henaway, *Essential Work, Disposable Workers: Migration, Capitalism and Class* (Toronto: Fernwood Publishing, 2023).
38. Bhandar and Toscano, 'Race, Real Estate and Real Abstraction', 13.
39. Bhandar and Toscano, 'Race, Real Estate and Real Abstraction', 13.
40. Stuart Hall, 'Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance', *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader* (1996), 16–60.
41. Bhandar and Toscano, 'Race, Real Estate and Real Abstraction', 16.
42. Bhandar and Toscano, 'Race, Real Estate and Real Abstraction', 11.
43. 'Realabstraktion' was not used by Marx (Finelli, 61), though 'reelle Abstraktion' was in *Contributions to the Critique of Political Economy*. See, Lange 'Real Abstraction'.
44. Mau, *Mute Compulsion*, 184.
45. Jappe, 'Sohn-Rethel and the Origin of "Real Abstraction"', 6.
46. Žižek appears to be one of the only theorists who has clearly apprehended the Kantian transcendental core of the concept of real abstraction. See Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Verso, 1989), 10–13.
47. See, for example, Andreas Malm on 'substance monism, property dualism' in Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London: Verso, 2020); and various authors who mobilise a first nature / second nature divide, e.g. Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).
48. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour* (London: Humanities Press, 1983), 14.
49. Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 35.
50. Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 14.
51. Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 74.
52. Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 92; emphasis mine.
53. Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 91.
54. Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 99.
55. Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 92.
56. It is relevant to mention here Moishe Postone's critique, that Sohn-Rethel fallaciously perceives the 'commodity form as being extrinsic to commodity-determined labor'. See Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 177–78. Indeed, Sohn-Rethel looks at commodities and commodity exchange as something which predates commodity-determined labour proper and instigates the formation of abstract cognition which enables abstract mathematics and other scientific developments. However, it might still be argued, in defense of Sohn-Rethel, that these pre-capitalist abstractions are but proto-abstractions, arising from societies *increasingly oriented around* but not *defined fundamentally by* commodity exchange proper.
57. 'The Hegelian dissolution of the Kantian antithesis is not achieved by dissolving them, but by making them perform as a process. The Hegelian dialectics has no other legitimacy than that it is a process occurring. Questioned as to its possibility it would prove impossible.' Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 13.
58. Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 15.
59. Slavoj Žižek pointed out a redeemable aspect of Sohn-Rethel's theory, which is that through his work on real abstraction, Sohn-Rethel 'has confronted the closed circle of philosophical reflection with an external place where its form is already "staged"'. In this sense, Žižek suggests, Sohn-Rethel brings in a theory of the unconscious. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 13–14.
60. Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 38.
61. I. I. Rubin, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1973), 5.
62. Maurício Vieira Martins, 'On Real Objects That Are Not Sensuous: Marx and Abstraction in Act' in *Marx and Contemporary Critical Theory*, 191–202.
63. I disagree with Kurz here that real abstractions involve a *doubling* of abstraction, whereas other mental abstractions do not. Either they are all doubled, or none of them are.
64. Galileo Galilei, J. L. Heilbron and Albert Einstein, *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems: Ptolemaic and Copernican*, eds. Stillman Drake and Stephen Jay Gould (New York: Modern Library, 2001).
65. Quoted in Martins, 'On Real Objects That Are Not Sensuous', 193.
66. Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 163.
67. It is nowhere clearer that contemporary theories of society and 'the social' have their basis in this society of value rather than the reverse as when we consider these passages from Marx.
68. Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, 138–39.
69. Perhaps the concept of 'field' and the supersession of the 'law of gravity' by 'general relativity' could offer a perspective to aid us in deepening our understanding of value.