

Michael Heinrich and the “Theoretical Field” of the Dialectic: A Hypothesis

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Abstract

In this article I discuss the problem of the dialectic in Michael Heinrich’s *The Science of Value*. Drawing on Adorno, I first examine the relation of the materialist dialectic to both the idealist dialectic and non-dialectical thought. I then argue that: 1) insofar as he provides an independent account of real abstraction, Heinrich makes a most relevant contribution to the debate on Marx’s dialectic precisely by avoiding focusing on it; 2) in the light of a fully developed dialectical logic such as it is presupposed by his own concept of «specific social relation», Heinrich’s reading of the critique of political economy does nonetheless reveal structural limits – particularly with regard to the dichotomy between normative and cognitive contents of science – that require some modification in his notion of «theoretical field».

Keywords

Michael Heinrich; dialectic; critique of political economy; Adorno; *Neue Marx-Lektüre*; Lukács

What else is he picturing but the dialectic method?
(Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, Afterword to the second German edition)

1. Decisive intellectual contributions are those whose core insights must be presupposed even by attempts to diverge from them. In this respect, one does not need to be a specialist in the economic debates on Marx to recognize Michael Heinrich’s *The Science of Value* as a watershed – as attested by, among other things, the international resonance of such a local event as its (great) Italian translation¹. Heinrich’s impressive reinterpretation of the critique of political economy as a whole rests on his ability to put thorough philological work at the service of global epistemological reflection and this, in turn, at the service of addressing specific problems in the *Capital* scholarship. It seems to me, in particular, that there are three major theses in the book that succeed, at first glance at least, in solving century-old dilemmas with Wittgensteinian simplicity:

1) The impossibility to maintain a money commodity as a requirement at the *Capital*’s level of abstraction *and* its irrelevance for Marx’s theory of money, since his value-form analysis only strictly implies deducing an autonomous value-figure²;

2) The unsolvability of the so-called «transformation problem» *and* its irrelevance for Marx’s theory of value, since the difference between values and production prices is not quantitative but

¹ Heinrich (1999). Quotations from Heinrich’s book have been directly translated from the 4th German edition, but page numbers refer to the Italian one. I wish to express my gratitude to Luiz de Caux, Manuel Disegni, Renata Guerra and Frederico Lyra for reading and commenting on this article, to Bruno Serrano for his valuable insights on the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* and to Guido Frilli and Silvia Locatelli for their clarifications on the problem of empirical reality in Hegel.

Research for this article received financial support from FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia – DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54499/2022.07238.CEECIND/CP1714/CT0027>.

² Heinrich (1999), chapter 6.4.

conceptual – namely a difference in the «determining factors» of prices –, thus turning the problem itself into a pseudo-problem³;

3) The indemonstrability of the tendential fall in the rate of profit as an a priori law of capital *and* its irrelevance for Marx’s (only roughly outlined) theory of crises, since the latter are intrinsic to the capitalist mode of production due to its relying on a «constant divergence of interrelated elements» – that is, due to such factors as the contradictory effects of the development of productive forces and the opposition between exploitation and realization of surplus value, which are largely independent from the trend in the average rate of profit⁴.

As far as I can judge, no conclusive arguments have yet been put forward against these three theses. Here, however, I intend to address a broader point, which all three more or less directly presuppose in that they are aimed, in Heinrich’s understanding, at dissolving as many of Marx’s «ambivalences». This point is Heinrich’s methodological conception of the critique of political economy as a new «theoretical field», on whose ground his *specific* notion of a «monetary theory of value» is conceived. As he extensively shows in the first two parts of the book, the epistemological break that begins to emerge in the *German Ideology* and the *Theses on Feuerbach* centers around the idea of the capitalist economic mediation as a *specific social relation*, which predetermines the agents’ behavior according to a logic that lies beneath the surface of social phenomena, thus simultaneously challenging all four basic assumptions of classical (and neo-classical) bourgeois economics – anthropologism, individualism, empiricism, a-historicity⁵. In the late Marx’s writings from the *Introduction* of 1857 to *Capital*, this relation is identified with *value* as a specific social form of the product of labor, namely as the necessary condition for (retroactively) socializing labor under the double presupposition of its private execution and social division. If so, conversely, value is *purely social* – “disenchanted” value from any naturalistic remnant is the whole point of Heinrich’s bold thesis that both the substance and the magnitude of value only come to existence in exchange and that, therefore, they are not even conceivable – much less knowable – outside their *monetary* expression⁶. Marx’s hesitations about the monetary character of value (with all the resulting pseudo-problems) are ultimately hesitations about its *social* character and, therefore, «ambivalences» as to the full scope of his own break with the theoretical field of political economy.

In the debates of the past half century, particularly within the context of the *Neue Marx-Lektüre*, both the general question of Marx’s categorial difference from classical economy and the specific interpretation of this difference as consisting in a monetary theory of value have been closely associated with the preexisting problem of Marx’s relationship with *Hegel* and the meaning of a materialist dialectic. Heinrich is obviously aware of this connection, but explicitly dismisses it as a core issue for the reconstruction of the critique of political economy, with a somehow curious argument based on logical priority: «clarifying this question [of the relationship between Marx and Hegel, G.Z.] already presupposes a vast understanding of Hegel *and* Marx, and cannot *therefore* count itself as a presupposition for an adequate understanding of the critique of political economy»⁷. The inference epitomized in this «therefore» is hardly convincing per se – it is well possible that, while *some* understanding of the critique of political economy can be attained prior to a discussion of Hegel, its *adequate* understanding does presuppose such discussion. I will now suggest that, in a certain respect, this is indeed the case. At the same time, however, I will argue that Heinrich’s non-Hegelian point of departure is not arbitrary and cannot be simply substituted by a direct account of Marx’s dialectic without losing its huge “disenchanted” power. Specifically, I will claim that: 1) Heinrich not only succeeds to a very large extent in reconstructing the critique of political economy without recurring to Hegel, but potentially opens up a new promising perspective

³ Ivi, chapter 7.2.

⁴ Ivi, chapter 8.5, 489.

⁵ On the problem of “conceptualizing a relationship” see Redolfi Riva, Taccola (2025), sections 4-5.

⁶ Breda (2025) very appropriately defines Heinrich’s work as a “science of disenchantment”.

⁷ Heinrich (1999), 267. The first italic is in the original, the second is mine.

on Marx’s relationship with Hegel *precisely by avoiding focusing on it*; 2) on the other side, in the light of a fully developed dialectical logic, Heinrich’s reading does reveal some structural inadequacies, so that, consistent with this very logic, his necessary initial categorial framework – as defined by the finite concept of «theoretical field» – cannot be entirely maintained at a later stage and must be, so to speak, dialectically sublated into the dialectic. Such a processual unfolding, however, precisely corresponds to the mode of exposition of *Capital* as Heinrich reconstructs it; in this sense, there is some methodological incongruity between Marx’s dynamic «meta-critique of political economy»⁸ and Heinrich’s static *meta-theory* of this meta-critique. Here I cannot even enter into the complexity of the debates on Hegel’s *Logic* and Marx’s *Capital*; however, given both the relevance of this question in itself *and* the (here suggested) relevance of Heinrich’s reading to its further discussion, it may be useful to advance a few preliminary remarks. Everything that follows, therefore, should be understood as not only very general but also highly hypothetical.

2. Heinrich’s relatively few pages on the dialectic are programmatically limited to Marx’s dialectical *presentation* (*Darstellung*) as a «determined explanatory connection between individual categories», distinct from an arbitrary order of nominalistic concepts in that its non-empirical constructions reveal the mediations actually present in the empirical datum and provide, therefore, themselves a «specific informational content»⁹. Such a “minimal” account of the materialist dialectic is intended to oppose two more traditional (and substantive) ones, namely Engels’s historicizing interpretation and the Hegelo-Marxist idea of *Capital*’s logical structure as a “transposition” of speculative forms – be it the «determinations of reflection» from Hegel’s logic of essence or the categories of concept from his subjective logic. Heinrich rejects them with two equally compelling arguments – respectively, the difference and cognitive priority of accomplished capital over its historical genesis and Hegel’s critique to the Kantian opposition of form and content, which prevents his own categories from being simply “applied” to a different object (a procedure criticized by Marx himself not only in Lassalle, as Heinrich rightly notes, but also in Proudhon¹⁰). The latter argument, however, rests on the implicit premise that capital indeed constitutes a *different* object, namely one that is logically unassimilable to Hegel’s standpoint. While most Hegelo-Marxists postulate an *identity* between Marx’s and Hegel’s logics, and Heinrich conceives them as *two separate dialectics* whose mutual relationship tends to mere homonymy, debates on this subject include a third option that he does not discuss. It is the idea that *Capital* should be conceptually understood as a regional *extension* of the Hegelian system, thus belonging not to the *Science of Logic* but to the *Realphilosophie*, as one more figure in Hegel’s «circle of circles». If this were the case, then *Capital* would stand to the *Logic* in the same way as Hegel’s own aesthetics or philosophy of right, that is, not in a categorial relationship of formalistic “transposition”, but of – itself dialectical – self-development¹¹. Against this possibility Heinrich mobilizes the classic argument of the opposition between Hegel’s “idealism” and Marx’s “realism” – a point he repeatedly stresses:

Hegel’s logical categories do not organize any external content that would be interchangeable – they always refer only to themselves. [...] Marx, however, always deals with an external object. His presentation must express the connection of this material¹².

In both Hegel and Marx, then, it is a question of a *conceptual* development. Still, in one case it is the concept (singular) that develops out of itself independently of all empirical datum [*Empirie*], while in the

⁸ Ivi, 198.

⁹ Ivi, 269.

¹⁰ See on this Disegni (2024), part 2, chapter 7.4.

¹¹ It seems to me that both Arndt (2020) and Fineschi (2024) converge in different ways on such a conclusion.

¹² Heinrich (1999), 265-266.

other it is about the connection of concepts (plural) that process empirical material without, however, being absorbed in merely nominalistic abstractions¹³.

For Hegel science, by establishing its own presuppositions, makes itself independent of everything external [...]. What Hegel celebrates at the end of the *Science of Logic* as the triumph of method, for Marx, by contrast, marks the point at which dialectical presentation reaches its *limit*. [...] For Marx, the dialectical presentation cannot become the self-contained, closed undertaking that is a condition for it to be true science in Hegel¹⁴.

Finally: insofar as he places the universal – which as a «real universal» distinguishes him from the empiricists – «immediately in sensible empirical reality», thus overcoming the «opposition between sensible reality and thought» allegedly «common to Hegel and Feuerbach», Marx «adopted an “Aristotelian” position against Hegel’s rather “Platonic” one on the question of the reality of universals»¹⁵.

In arguing along these lines, Heinrich draws on Marx’s own understanding of his difference from Hegel as famously stated in the afterword to the second German edition of *Capital*’s first volume:

My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the name of “the Idea”, he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of “the Idea”. With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought. [...]

The mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel’s hands, by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell¹⁶.

Two aspects of Marx’s view emerge from this ever-quoted passage, both highly relevant to Heinrich in opposite directions. First, and most noticeable, there is at least one point in Marx’s reading of Hegel that has not changed since his early writings. Despite his overcoming of nominalism and his consequent reassessment of the role of abstractions in Hegel, correctly emphasized by Heinrich, the late Marx holds to the idea of materialism as some kind of “inversion” of speculative idealism. What used to be, in Feuerbach’s terms, the reversal of the “subject-predicate relation”, becomes here the «turning right side up again» of the genetic priority of «real world» over «human brain» – in both cases, Hegel’s concept is seen as «mystified» insofar as it is supposed to somehow “produce empirical reality”. Second, and no less important, Marx does not regard his own dialectic as merely *different* from, nor even as *closer to truth* than, Hegel’s, but rather as adequately revealing *something already presupposed* yet inadequately expressed by it – in Hegel’s own terms, the «rational kernel» is the *truth* of the «mystical shell» itself. Now, Heinrich 1) *accepts* Marx’s understanding of Hegel’s “idealism”, while 2) *rejecting* (implicitly) the idea of a logical-dialectical derivation between the two dialectics, which is precisely inconceivable within a structuralist framework centered around virtually incommensurable categorial systems – the “theoretical field” of theoretical fields. *Both* 1) and 2), however, are problematic moves.

The trouble with the argument of Marx’s relying on «empirical material» as the distinctive mark of the materialist dialectic is that the opposite, namely “idealism” understood as independence from any «external content», simply does not seem to apply to Hegel. As recent Hegelian scholarship has convincingly shown, the speculative identity of the categorial content does not concern the *epistemological* problem of its origin – empirical or otherwise – but the *logical-ontological* problem

¹³ Ivi, 268.

¹⁴ Ivi, 273-274.

¹⁵ Ivi, 249; 249, f. 61.

¹⁶ Marx (1890), 19.

of its rational transparency. What Hegel questions, in other words, is not the external *reality* as a starting point for scientific reconstruction, but precisely the external – “finite” – *subjectivity* projecting arbitrary abstractions onto the material. Conversely, Hegel’s «objective thinking» coincides with that reconstruction, i.e., with the very knowledge of immanent mediations that Heinrich ascribes to Marx’s anti-nominalistic method, under Hegel’s own name of «real universal» or Sohn Rethel’s name of «real abstraction» (and without which Marx’s *Darstellung* could not «express the connection of the material»). In this sense, Hegel is indeed an “Aristotelian” rather than a “Platonic”¹⁷.

The problem of such conclusion for Heinrich’s account of Marx’s dialectic is that he himself appears to acknowledge that, by discovering real universals as the processual unfolding of an objective logic, Hegel already overcame *all four* assumptions of bourgeois thought and of political economy within it (anthropologism, individualism, empiricism, a-historicity)¹⁸. Without the limiting clause of Hegel’s “idealism”, therefore, there seems to be no way to differentiate Marx from Hegel *in Heinrich’s own terms*. What was intended as a sound distancing from Hegel threatens to reverse into its opposite, for the actual “scientific revolution” now seems to coincide with the introduction of *the dialectic as such*. Admittedly, Heinrich argues less out of the alleged *creative* power of the concept in Hegel than out of its absence of *presuppositions*, in contrast to the historical existence of fully developed capitalist production as a logically underivable “limit of the dialectic” in Marx¹⁹. Still, based on the aforementioned hypothesis about Hegel’s *Realphilosophie*, one might argue that what appears as presupposed at the beginning of a circle is actually posited at the end of another, so that the limits of the dialectic are relative in each case and there are no objections *in principle* to the full absorption of Marx into a broader Hegelian framework. If, however, one is unwilling to accept the theoretical *and political* consequences of this conflation, then one must try to determine the actual difference between the two dialectics in another way, navigating as it were between the Scylla of Hegelo-Marxism and the Charybdis of traditional straw man arguments against Hegel. While granting that Hegel is not an “idealist” *in the immediate sense* discussed thus far, it remains to be seen whether his idealism cannot be asserted *in another sense*²⁰.

3. Precisely this task is the core issue of a thinker never mentioned in *The Science of Value*, namely Adorno in his *Three Studies on Hegel* and *Negative Dialectics*. In a way, these two works are but long commentaries to the passage from Marx’s afterword quoted above. For Adorno, the materialist dialectic is indeed the «rational kernel» to be extracted from the «mystical shell» of the idealist one, in that it fully develops the former’s *own* principle, which he calls the «nonidentity» of concept and thing: the dialectic *as such* «is the consistent sense of nonidentity»²¹. This means, on one side, acknowledging that Hegel’s innermost impulse is *the very opposite* of subjective idealism, for his speculation differs from earlier forms of rationalism in that it conceives of knowledge as resulting from a confrontation of concept and object, i.e., a critique of *finite* subjective constructions or, in

¹⁷ Among many contributions on this subject, see Houlgate (2006) and, from the perspective of the Hegel-Marx relationship, again Fineschi (2024). On Hegel’s Aristotelianism see Ferrarin (2001).

¹⁸ See Heinrich (1999), chapter 4.7.

¹⁹ As does Breda (2024) in his subtle analysis of the difference between idealist and materialist dialectics, also suggesting that the classical image of “reversal” should be replaced by that of “delimitation”. In Heinrich’s terms: «This does not mean that Hegel simply confuses the thought process with the real process, but that his attempt at a presuppositionless thought, understanding the concrete as the result of the “self-generating concept”, overlooks the real presuppositions» (Heinrich 1999, 252).

²⁰ In a similar spirit, Bellofiore (2025, 28) argues that, while today’s Hegelo-Marxists tend to conflate Hegel with Marx based on the philologically correct assumption that the former is not «an absolute idealist», the «*false* Hegel» as read by the «Hegelo-Marxians» (or «Marxian-Hegelians») from the 1960s and 1970s, for whom «the reference to Hegel was at the same time a critique (of idealism and capital at once)», is more fruitful than the true one both for Marx and for us. What I will now be claiming, with Adorno, is that theirs is indeed the *true* Hegel – just not in the basic sense assumed by Marx (and many others).

²¹ Adorno (1966), 5.

Heinrich’s terms, «nominalistic abstractions». Identity itself, *as a moment* of the dialectic – that is, as a *process* rather than a presupposition –, is a condition for knowledge to be truly objective: «The farther Hegel takes idealism, even epistemologically, the closer he comes to social materialism; the more he insists, against Kant, on comprehending his subject matter from the inside out. [...] Once the object has become subject in the absolute, the object is no longer inferior vis-à-vis the subject. At its extreme, identity becomes the agent of the nonidentical»²².

On the other side, however, Hegel’s dialectic becomes *undialectical* by reversing – in Marx’s words: putting «on its head» – the logical hierarchy of identity and nonidentity and, thus, of idealism and materialism themselves, turning the latter into a moment of the former. Adorno’s different formulations in this regard all intend the same: Hegel’s «subject-object» ends up in a «primacy of the subject» to which the materialist dialectic must oppose a symmetrical «primacy of the object»; Hegel affirms nonidentity in detail, but identity in the whole; he transfigures total mediation into an absolute rather than regard it as itself mediated²³. Adorno’s basic argument rests on the premise of a duplicity of (modern) rationality, articulated for the first time with Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* but based in turn on the young Lukács’s concept of «second nature» and, thereby, on Marx’s analysis of the «social objectivity» of value from the section of *Capital* on the fetish character of the commodity. Capitalist society is a «negative totality» organized along a «rational irrationality», for what structures it into a societal *whole* that is knowable as such is an abstract – i.e., rational, and hence *subjective* – principle which, at the same time, entails the *objective* domination of this very universal over individual subjects. And, since Adorno shares Sohn-Rethel’s view of the abstract concept as a cognitive counterpart for the «real abstraction» of value, dialectical thought is for him the conscious self-reflection of the negativity present in both bourgeois science and society. As such, the dialectic is co-extensive with the capitalist mode of production (conceived in turn as the consistent unfolding a «nature-dominating rationality» already latent in earlier societies) – not an ontology, therefore, but its very opposite, namely «the ontology of the wrong state of things», itself to be sublated in a classless society that would be «neither a system nor a contradiction»²⁴. According to Adorno, Hegel does understand the structure of modern society as a universal mediation, simultaneously hidden and revealed in its phenomena – wherein lies the properly dialectical «rational kernel» of his thought. However, while discovering the scientific method for grasping partial mediations, he does not recognize the *totality* of these mediations as itself partial – that is, as a «negative» totality – but transfigures it into something ideal, i.e., an absolute that only needs to be (self-)known to achieve freedom – to which Adorno objects as an orthodox Marxist by calling to emancipatory praxis: «What is negated is negative until it has passed. This is the decisive break with Hegel»²⁵.

For Adorno, the categorial core of Hegel’s mystification is his reversal of the relationship between *spirit* and *labor*, implying at once a reversal of the *negative* into the *positive*. While in reality “spirit”, as intellectual labor, is only a specific mode of the actual universal mediation established by (social) labor, Hegel transforms labor into a dimension of spirit, thus sublimating it into a pure activity devoid of any natural and social compulsion: «the great classical philosophy literally passes the quintessence of coercion off as freedom»²⁶. Adorno here is not referring to a trans-historical concept of labor or even a generic concept of social labor, but specifically to labor *as such*, i.e., insofar as it is abstracted from all qualitatively concrete *content* and *purpose* and only thereby, at the same time, capable of articulating an objective totality and susceptible to being

²² Adorno (1963), 68-69.

²³ For a detailed analysis of Adorno’s critiques to Hegel see Sommer (2016). On the interpretation of these critiques I am briefly outlining here see Zanotti (2025) and, on the «reversal» of Hegel’s dialectic in Marx and Adorno, Zanotti (2015).

²⁴ Adorno (1966), 11.

²⁵ Adorno (1966), 160.

²⁶ Adorno (1963), 26.

idealized as an intransitive self-relation. Hegel’s «mystical shell» is thus, for Adorno, ultimately the *spiritualization of abstract labor*²⁷. Against this outcome, the materialist dialectic is called to eventually negate not just individual moments, as in Hegel, but the totality of negations itself, i.e., the social *and* conceptual historical whole constituted by abstract labor – a movement which, as already mentioned, amounts to no less than the dialectic’s *own* negation as a positive ontology: «By specifying, in opposition to Hegel, the negativity of the whole, philosophy satisfies, for the last time, the postulate of determinate negation»²⁸; «To this end, dialectics is obliged to make a final move: being at once the impression and the critique of the universal delusive context, it must now turn even against itself»²⁹.

Two remarks can be made about Adorno’s solution. The first is that he does appear to succeed in restoring the old critique to Hegel’s “idealism” *at a new level*. His entire argument revolves as it were around the logical clause: “even so”. On the one hand, he concedes that, epistemologically, Hegel’s concept cannot be charged with subjectivism in the sense of projecting onto – let alone producing – empirical reality, but, quite on the contrary, is aimed at rescuing the emphatic possibility of objective knowledge of the “thing-in-itself” against Kant’s formalism. Precisely this possibility, however, depends for Adorno on the human (i.e., socialized) character of the modern world – of bourgeois society and of nature itself insofar as mediated by social labor. This real ground of Hegel’s spirit, therefore, only needs to be recognized as such to reveal the duplicity inherent to modernity itself and ultimately resting, in Heinrich’s terms, on the indirect socialization of private labor. That the universal mediation of value is an *abstraction* has a twofold consequence. As a *social objectivity* – a *second nature* – value is the principle of rationalization and, hence, of the commensurability between the subjective abstractions of science and “real abstractions”. As a *social objectivity* – a *second nature* – it transcends human needs and, in this sense, resists human understanding, so that the object of science is indeed known “as it is in itself”, but this being-in-itself is not in turn a self-transparent Idea in which “the concept” can acquiesce. The real *is* rational, only its rationality is not a rational one.

Notably, this strategy allows Adorno to account for *all* of the objections – in their literal sense misplaced – that Marx addresses to Hegel. Turning the latter «right side up again» does not mean *directly* proceeding back from «predicate» to «subject» or from the «human brain» to the «real world», but, as we have seen, from *positivity* to *negativity* or, in Adorno’s terms, from the «spirit» to the «anti-spirit»³⁰. This implies, however, that there is also a sense in which Hegel’s speculative identity can indeed be accused of illegitimately attempting to “produce” empirical reality out of itself – precisely by spiritualizing the anti-spirit. If the materialist dialectic does differ from Hegel in that it runs into a «presupposition» that it cannot «posit», it is not because Hegel “deduces” reality from thought in the epistemological sense of dispensing with prior access to a material. Hegel also starts from this material to reconstruct a posteriori its immanent logic, which *then* is claimed to be “deduced” a priori insofar, and only insofar, as it proves fully accountable to human reason and is *thus* “identical” to it. According to Adorno, on the contrary, Marx’s actual discovery regardless of

²⁷ Adorno’s labor theory, therefore, implicitly rests on Marx’s remark that «labor as such» is already a bourgeois concept. The double abstraction from content and purpose he speaks about concerns, respectively, the external *constraints* of labor (the natural resistance of the object and the social monopoly of the objective conditions of production) and its inner tendency, resulting from *both* these constraints, to achieve *its own end*. To him, abstract labor is labor deprived of its self-transcending dynamic (see Adorno 1963, 17-32). In this sense, Adorno does envisage the utopia of an «abolishment of labor», or, more accurately, of labor *as a necessity*. Still, his dialectical account of this utopia differs from many others in that it relies on the *duplicity* of *all* labor as both constraining and emancipatory – a duplicity which also provides the ultimate conceptual ground for the *self-overcoming* horizon of (modern) reason as “intellectual labor” and, thereby, of the dialectic itself: «In the last analysis, even in Hegel the quiescence of movement, the absolute, means simply the reconciled life, the life of the pacified drive that no longer knows either deficiency or the labor to which alone, however, it owes that reconciliation» (Adorno 1963, 32, italics mine).

²⁸ Adorno (1963), 87-88.

²⁹ Adorno (1966), 406.

³⁰ Adorno (1966, 356) defines Marx’s *Capital* as a «phenomenology of the anti-spirit».

his self-understanding is that the logic of his object – *the same as Hegel’s* – is not itself logical, i.e., rationally justifiable, and *in this sense* it must be assumed as a merely given empirical fact. The «limit of the dialectic», therefore, does not fall outside it; it is not, as for Marx and Heinrich, the extra-logical edge of a logical presentation, but belongs to the specific duplicity of its own object, to which the presentation itself is “identical” in Hegel’s sense. Since, for Adorno, the dialectic as such is just the self-consciousness of the capitalist social relation, it cannot but apply to it what Marx says of capital – *the limit of the dialectic is the dialectic itself*.

4. Hence follows directly the second and crucial remark. Adorno’s argument necessarily presupposes an *unconditional concept of reason* as he inherits it from classical German philosophy, that is, of a reason whose criterion of adequacy lies in transcending partial forms – be they individual categories, cognitive standpoints such as “paradigms” and “theoretical fields”, or the very split between cognitive and normative dimensions, knowledge and interest. It is the concept that first appears in an ambivalent form in Kant’s “reason” (*Vernunft*) as the faculty of ideas opposed to “understanding” (*Verstand*), and whose further elaboration constitutes the main challenge of post-Kantian idealism from Fichte to Hegel. In the Hegelian system, reason as an “absolute” remains the same throughout its “finite” figures, gaining greater *truth* to the extent, *and on the same grounds*, that it gains greater *freedom* and vice versa, so that “facticity” and “validity” do not stand in the external relation of “existence” and “essence” identified by Heinrich in the young Marx³¹. They are neither separate from nor independent standards for each other – as they are, respectively, for moral positivism and transcendentalism – but properly indistinguishable. Hegel thus provides, among other things, the philosophical premises for Horkheimer’s later concept of «critical theory», whose core difference from «traditional theory» consists precisely in its conflating a practical horizon of social emancipation with a deeper insight into present reality *and* in its awareness of this very conflation³². In Adorno’s case, Hegel’s broader understanding of reason is required to make sense of Marx’s difference from Hegel himself once the current account of his “idealism” has been dismissed – which is the same as claiming that, for the *materialist dialectic* to be such rather than either idealist or a retreat to a pre-dialectical approach, it must be regarded as itself a dialectical “sublation”. For on an one-sidedly epistemic level – “value-free” in Weber’s sense – it would be possible *neither* to denounce the “irrationality” of capitalist social totality and, therefore, of its Hegelian idealization, *nor*, consequently, to conceive of the materialist dialectic as an increase in “rationality” over the idealist dialectic and thus – in Marx’s own spirit – as its *truth*.

This in turn has two consequences. One is what I referred to above as Heinrich’s unique contribution to the discussion on the dialectic. The other is what I see as the main limit of his reading altogether.

The notion of a dialectical overcoming of idealism first implies that, *precisely insofar* as materialism displays its “truth”, *it must add to it something* that the idealist dialectic does not yet “posit”. In his essay on Marx’s dialectic, Stefano Breda rightly argues against the conception of the categorial development in *Capital* as a «germ-cell dialectic» (*Keimzellendialektik*), according to which further categories are implicitly “contained” in, and thus simply “deduced” by, earlier ones. For him, on the contrary, the dialectical *Darstellung* is to be conceived as an «a posteriori reconstruction of the conditions of existence for what is given», namely, as the proof of the necessary interdependence between individual forms that are all empirically found, so that the more complex categories, having a content irreducible to the simpler ones, explain them in being retrospectively revealed as their «presupposition», and not vice versa³³. While Breda dismisses the deductive conception of the dialectic as still «idealistic», I suggested above that his alternative

³¹ Heinrich (1999), chapters 3-4.

³² See Horkheimer (1937).

³³ See Breda (2024).

description *per se* does not yet constitute an objection against Hegel, whose system can also be considered, in Breda’s terms, as an «immanent critique of the empirical», i.e., a retroactive development of logical implications – only that, in Hegel’s case, it is the *absolute* logic of a *given* whole. Breda’s insight, however, provides a most valuable clue to the relationship of dialectical implication between *the two dialectics* themselves. If the materialist dialectic *explains* the idealist one, then it must possess an exceeding content that cannot be entirely expressed in dialectical categories *as these are framed by idealism* and must, therefore, be susceptible to an independent account *at some point*. It is here that I see the great merit of Heinrich’s “enlightenment” – in every sense of this word.

The originality of Heinrich’s position in this regard can be better appreciated through a brief comparison with by far the most thorough objection ever made to him on Hegelian premises, namely Hans-Georg Backhaus’ and Helmut Reichelt’s lengthy critical review of *The Science of Value*³⁴. Here they draw precisely on Adorno to expose alleged *categorical* inadequacies of Heinrich’s account, which they rightfully approximate to structuralism, from the standpoint of a *dialectical* monetary theory of value; their way of doing so, however, seems to me symptomatic of a still ambivalent relation to Hegel. I shall focus only on one central aspect of their quite complex argument.

According to Backhaus and Reichelt, Heinrich’s thesis that value, being only social, also exists only in exchange and is tied to productive labor by a mere «relation of determination» (*Determinationsverhältnis*), implies bringing the critique of political economy back into the «two-world theory» (*Zweiweltenlehre*) of bourgeois thought. This is how they refer to the pre-dialectical view that knows no entities other than conscious representations and material objects, and accordingly divides the economic reality between the two unrelated dimensions of purely private and natural production on one hand, purely interpersonal and social circulation on the other. Such conception, they argue, precludes precisely an adequate account of value as mediating the *unity* – however contradictory – of capitalist society, and thereby functioning as a *universal* that nonetheless possesses an extra-psychic objective *existence*. In their words, value limited to exchange is a «punctual» reality that corresponds to its «vanishing» form of appearance in the sphere of simple circulation, but by no means to the «intersubjective validity and intertemporality» that it acquires as soon as it acts as a *process*, that is, as retaining its self-moving identity through its different money- and commodity-forms at the abstraction level of *capital* circulation³⁵. The same defective understanding of the objectivity of value would also prevent Heinrich from making any consistent sense of his own concept of «real abstraction», for only on nominalistic premises would it be possible to contend that «the supersensible cannot exist sensibly, it can only be *designated* by a sensible object»³⁶ – which in turn is a condition for the further conclusion that «*all* money is a *value sign*»³⁷ and that, therefore, a money *commodity* is not logically required.

Backhaus and Reichelt’s suggestion to avoid these alleged shortcomings is to formulate a «dialectical concept of labor»³⁸ such as they believe can be inferred from a number of hints throughout Marx’s late writings. This «universal labor», they claim, is to be conceived as a «totality in the Hegelian sense», namely, as an «overgrasping universality» (*übergreifende Allgemeinheit*)³⁹ that includes particularity, so as to conceptually ground «the unity of concrete-sensible and abstract labor» on «the processual character of the universal that overgrasps the individual»⁴⁰: «Labor as a totality is [...] the activity that, as a particular one, immediately produces its own opposite, the

³⁴ Backhaus, Reichelt (1995).

³⁵ Ivi, 85.

³⁶ Heinrich (1999), 338.

³⁷ Ivi.

³⁸ Backhaus, Reichelt (1995), 79.

³⁹ Ivi, 73.

⁴⁰ Ivi, 77.

general, the unity. At the same time, however, it is a unity that particularizes itself in the private, sensible-concrete activities»⁴¹. As such, i.e., as a dynamic unfolding of «identity» and «non-identity», universal labor is responsible for the truly «real abstraction» of value, whose objectivity transcends any mere intersubjective agreement and, in its self-movement, does not extinguish itself in any limited form – thus also mediating capitalist society as itself both a *totality* and *contradictory*, or, in other words, allowing for «the constant creation and disappearance» of its *specific* unity, which «simultaneously is and is not»⁴².

It must be noted, however, that both the objectivity and the intertemporality of value *per se* can be integrally accounted for in Heinrich’s own terms – namely as the features it holds as a «social relation» in his sense. For they consist in the objective and intertemporal *consequences* of value as a mode of socialization. Its abstraction may well be conceived “nominalistically” by Heinrich in the terms of Backhaus and Reichelt’s objection, that is, as being an abstraction only to the extent that it is translatable by *us* in the usual terms of a logical operation. But it is *wirklich* in the strict sense of the German word – it *acts* on the individuals equating their concrete labor in exchange, who «do this without being aware of it»⁴³, *as if* they were consciously abstracting. That an abstraction can be effective without being performed, or, from another perspective, that value only existing «punctually» in exchange exerts a constraint on social actors even – and especially – when it does not exist, is certainly absurd; but, as claimed again by Marx, it is «exactly this absurd form» that shapes social behavior under capitalist conditions⁴⁴. Precisely the discontinuity in the existence of value makes that «in the midst of the accidental and ever-fluctuating exchange relations between the products, the labour-time socially necessary to produce them asserts itself as a regulative law of nature»⁴⁵. In referring this constraint back to the conflicting requirements of private and socially divided labor, Heinrich states its true name, so to speak, out of metaphor; and, while indeed not feeling compelled to introduce further entities than human beings and natural objects, he does succeed in showing how they both enter into a social *relation* that forces them into a specific *form*.

It is not, therefore, a matter of internal inconsistency in Heinrich’s conceptual framework. Backhaus and Reichelt repeatedly label the view they ascribe to both Heinrich and bourgeois science a «representation» that, as such, is not yet adequately «thought out» (*gedacht*) – thus implicitly opposing *Vorstellung* and *Begriff* in Hegel’s sense. Their point, therefore, is clearly always about the appropriate categorial determination – while Heinrich asks how real abstraction *works*, they struggle to define what it “actually is”. In so doing, however, they accuse Heinrich of not solving a problem that he himself does not pose – *nor should he*. This is because, by expressing value in Hegelian terms, they reduce it to categories that had been framed from the outset as ideal. A «two-world theory» can only be objectionable for someone who seeks in the critique of political economy a theory *of the world* – unitary, dual, or otherwise – that is, of its *essence*⁴⁶. Essences, however, cannot change in the way social relations do. They are by definition spiritual – hence at the same time, and for the same reason, *positive* and *eternal*. They are – to use a term I have purposely avoided thus far – *ontological* in the sense which Adorno spent his life criticizing. If,

⁴¹ Ivi, 79.

⁴² Ivi, 77.

⁴³ Marx (1890), 166-167.

⁴⁴ Ivi, 169.

⁴⁵ Ivi, 168.

⁴⁶ Backhaus and Reichelt’s discussion of the «two-world theory» is complicated by an additional element, namely Heinrich’s (1999, 320) introduction of the new concept of «abstract labor time» (*abstrakte Arbeitszeit*), which they view as exacerbating his dualism and which I also find hardly tenable. Time, in Marx’s use of this concept as referred to *both* concrete and abstract labor, is already considered as a mere magnitude, that is, not in its qualitative aspects as a Bergsonian lived experience. As such, «socially necessary labor time» is neither “abstract” nor “concrete”, but rather the *measure* for quantitatively converting concrete into abstract labor on both levels, technological and societal (demand-related). I see this remark as strengthening Micaloni’s (2025) correct argument on the unity of concrete and abstract labor. I also think, however, that the concept of abstract labor time can be discarded without major consequences for Heinrich’s overall reading.

then, as Adorno himself claims, Hegel’s “mystification” consists in spiritualizing the self-relation of value and, thus, reversing the negative into the positive, the counter-movement from the positive to the negative cannot just follow the backward path. For, in Hegel, the categories expressing this very mystification are *conceived in the first place* to organically compose a whole that culminates in the self-relating *concept*, so that each of them bears in its innermost logical fiber a normative projection toward absolute freedom. The final name of this whole – “Idea” – retroacts in a way on the semantic constitution of previous categories. These cannot, therefore, be either simply detached from their idealist context or simply “inverted” in their value sign, if one is not to limit oneself, as it were, to replacing a good god with an evil one⁴⁷. Reichelt in particular, by contrast, seems to maintain in his other writings that Hegel’s logic is true as it is, but only with reference to capitalist society, and must therefore be both assumed and historicized⁴⁸. If this were the case, then the materialist position toward Hegel would be formally analogous to Marx’s position in the mid-1840s toward political economy. The reasons behind Marx’s later change of perspective, as thoroughly exposed by Heinrich, may have some structural affinity – which would require detailed study – to the reasons for Adorno’s own method in *Negative Dialectics*, which is neither mere “transposition” nor mere “inversion” of Hegelian categories, but their «refunctioning» (*Umfunktionierung*) in Brecht’s sense⁴⁹. All of them are retained, but modified both in themselves and in their mutual relations – each means something different from its idealist homonym, *precisely insofar as it expresses its truth*.

Thus, Heinrich’s independent – non-Hegelian – account of real abstraction might for the first time allow to substantiate a hypothesis which, as I stated at the beginning, I can only mention here as such. According to this hypothesis, the critique of political economy, by possessing a surplus content irreducible to the idealist dialectic, stands to it – in Breda’s terms – as the *explanans* to the *explanandum* and not, as Backhaus and Reichelt would have it, the reverse. This, I suspect, is also the reason why the debates on which part of Hegel’s system “corresponds” to Marx’s *Capital* – whether the logic of essence or the logic of concept; whether the *Science of Logic* as a whole or the *Realphilosophie* – are properly unsolvable. For, while Hegel’s Idea can be *retrospectively* “deduced” from capital as its transfiguration, capital conversely has something *more* about it that cannot be fully expressible in Hegelian categories, but only in its own terms. While, in fact, its self-positing movement *resembles* the “infinity” of concept, it still confronts living labor power as an antagonistic “presupposition” that it can never fully absorb, and, for the same reason, its “logical” totalizing function, while not being reducible to a constituted object among others, remains nevertheless infected with the inadequacy of Hegel’s *Realität*⁵⁰. One can certainly state, therefore, that self-valorizing value acts *as if it were* a «totality in the Hegelian sense», but only if one means that, in its *independent* description, value *reveals* what is aimed at in a distorted way by Hegel’s concept of totality, while being at the same time illuminated in some crucial respects by this comparison. More generally: there is only one dialectic, the materialist one, and capitalist social relations – not just their *Darstellung* – are dialectical. They can and must be described through dialectical categories as originally set forth by idealism, in that these categories articulate them at a higher conceptual level, thus providing additional informational content – one that, as I will now

⁴⁷ See on this my commentary to Postone in Zanotti (2022), 253, f. 28, as well as *ivi*, *passim*, for further considerations (indebted, although not explicitly referred, to Heinrich) on a “disenchanted” conception of capitalist “social objectivity”.

⁴⁸ See Reichelt (1970).

⁴⁹ See Adorno’s statement in Horkheimer, Adorno (1939), 488.

⁵⁰ The work of Brazilian philosopher Ruy Fausto goes in the direction of the argument I have just outlined. Both of the remarks I have made about Hegel’s essence and concept, on one hand, and his logic and *Realphilosophie*, on the other, have been advanced drawing on Fausto and Adorno in the excellent PhD dissertations of Gabriel Bichir and Renata Guerra, respectively. The latter, in particular, argues against Andreas Arndt that the critique of political economy is not reducible to either the *Science of Logic* or the *Realphilosophie* but retains elements from both, due to Marx’s reversal of the logical hierarchy between Hegel’s *Wirklichkeit* and *Realität*.

argue, results in the sublation of *some* initial descriptions. What *the dialectic itself in turn is*, however, can only be said by the critique of political economy. Again, not: abstract labor is spirit, but: spirit is abstract labor. In this regard, Heinrich seems to be closer to Adorno than Adorno’s own students, and his account as opposed to theirs is a *disenchanted* monetary theory of value, or rather: a monetary theory of value *as* a disenchantment⁵¹. In the terms of this account, the dialectic *is* the “meta-theory of social objectivity”⁵² – the categorial self-reflection of the historical form constituted by the retroactive socialization of private labor. And here, «we reach bedrock and our spade is turned», for, as in Wittgenstein, further explanation is neither possible nor necessary. Paraphrasing Marx: Hegel’s system is the anatomy of the ape, *Capital* is the anatomy of man – not vice versa.

5. Granted, the latter image is referred by Marx to different stages of development of a historical object and its displacement to the relation between distinct “theoretical fields” would perhaps be accepted by him, but presumably not by Heinrich. Right here, however, I believe, lies the problem with Heinrich’s overall meta-theoretical view. For while, as I have suggested, the critique of political economy is on the one hand the *explanation* of the dialectic, on the other hand it is precisely the *explanation of the dialectic* and must, therefore, be able to account for *all* its essential dimensions, however reconfigured. This holds in particular for the *dynamic* character of dialectical concepts and, thereby, for a difference I have not yet discussed, namely that between Hegel and political economy as objects of Marx’s critique. Indeed, in terms of Marx’s understanding as redefined by Adorno, the idealist dialectic as idealist remains caught in bourgeois fetishism, that is, in an *ontologization* of given relations that parallels their *naturalization* by political economists. As a *dialectic*, however, it is already in principle a critique of this same fetishism. The problem we ran into above is that idealism is inherent in the dialectical categories from the beginning and, therefore, their materialist translation needs an addition from outside. This “outside”, however, must be conceived in such a way as to include the addition that the dialectical categories in turn possess vis-à-vis *all* pre-dialectical thought, if liberation from speculative idealism is not to be achieved at the price of a relapse into the naturalism of bourgeois economics⁵³. In other words, according to the hypothesis outlined thus far, what I called the “unconditional concept of reason” should be able to emerge from the structure of the capitalist social relation *as Heinrich describes it*.

If so, then Heinrich’s meta-theoretical framework would also be dynamized in the following way. His *necessarily* non-dialectical starting point would be transposed *by its own developments* into a different “theoretical field,” that of the dialectic, which would retrospectively modify the very concept of “theoretical field”, in a kind of sublating movement itself not conceivable on the initial premises. For, with all the epistemological critique underlying *The Science of Value*⁵⁴, Heinrich maintains the traditional concept of science in at least two respects, which correspond precisely to the “finite” dimensions of the “understanding” in the sense of classical German philosophy – that is, in conceiving the object of science as strictly delimited toward both other objects (whether understood realistically or through the filter of paradigms and theoretical fields) *and* the knowing subject with its normative stance. According to Heinrich:

⁵¹ Perhaps, therefore, Heinrich’s itself *non*-dialectical account can be regarded as the first scientific articulation of the moment of truth of «positivism» – in the broader sense of the analytic method as opposed to the dialectic, not limited to what Heinrich terms «empiricism» – that, according to Adorno (1958, chap. 12), is intrinsic to the materialist dialectic as materialist.

⁵² This expression has been suggested to me by Stefano Breda.

⁵³ On the dynamic surplus of the dialectic, see Cesarale’s (2025) insightful remarks about the difference between the self-movement of contradictions in Hegel and the mere «incompleteness» of partial concepts.

⁵⁴ Heinrich (1999), introduction, § 2.

The *political* critique of capitalist relations must be distinguished from the *scientific* critique of the “standpoint” of economics, of the construction of its theoretical object. This political critique is by no means the presupposition of the scientific results, it is their consequence⁵⁵.

Yet capitalist relations are not a scientific object like any other. That value is a *social* objectivity ultimately means that it forms a human product in spite of everything – which is precisely the point of the *critique*. This, however, is not without consequences for basic epistemological relations. Marx’s statement that «all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided»⁵⁶ logically implies that a social relation no longer compelled to separate its «outward appearance» from its «essence» would not be the object of a *different* science, but of *no science* at all. In other words, since the historical contingency of the conditions for a “science of the economic” – hence of its critique – falls itself within Marx’s critical scope, then the critique of political economy is a science *whose existence* – its possibility and necessity – *belongs to its own object*, thus already determining a peculiar subject-object relationship that threatens to escape *any* pre-dialectical epistemology. This point is of direct political relevance, as it concerns the existence or non-existence of a mutual implication between political practice itself and a «scientific critique» conceived by Heinrich as purely objective.

It is very telling that, when repeatedly arguing against the idea of a «standpoint of the proletariat» (*Standpunkt des Proletariats*) as an internal condition for the critique of political economy⁵⁷, Heinrich always refers this phrase to the late Althusser rather than to its original author, namely Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* (whom he quotes in other respects), undoubtedly the most direct mediation between Hegel on one side and Horkheimer and Adorno on the other. Certainly, Lukács’s reification theory has several aspects incompatible with both Heinrich’s view and a critical theory drawing on Adorno – not just the metaphysical hypostasis of the proletariat as the «identical subject-object», but also the primacy of a *historical* dialectic, however distinguished from the logical one⁵⁸. Lukács’s central point, however, is another. It concerns the epistemological and political consequences of the dual nature of capitalist society. Its specific mode of socialization represents, on one side, the first historical attempt at an integral «rationalization» of both natural and human relations, which is, though, on the other side, a mere «rationalization based on private economic calculation», so that the overall outcome of individual agency is not itself rational, but rather objectified vis-à-vis private actors into a «second nature» as «the “unconscious” product of the activity of the different commodity owners acting independently of one another»⁵⁹. The fetishistic semblance produced by this ambivalence is expressed in modern philosophy by the two «antinomies» converging into Kant’s concept of the thing-in-itself, namely the antinomy of *part* and *whole* and that of *form* and *content*. Both result from the nature of capitalist relations as at the same time confined to conflicting «*partial* systems» – ultimately, rationalized private production processes – and *abstracting* from qualitative contents – of concrete

⁵⁵ Ivi, 504.

⁵⁶ Marx (1894), 804.

⁵⁷ Heinrich (1999), 238-239, f. 37; 422, f. 88.

⁵⁸ «The succession and internal order of the categories constitute neither a purely logical sequence, nor are they organized merely in accordance with the facts of history» (Lukács 1923, 159). It should be added that, with the delimitation of a distinctly logical dialectic, the question of the possibility of a historical dialectic is not yet settled, although such a possibility would obviously contradict a strict interpretation of Adorno’s and Reichelt’s insistence on the coextensivity of dialectic and capitalism. While their point is to defend the non-dialectical – because non-contradictory – character of *post-capitalist* society, Adorno’s solution as to pre-capitalist modes of production seems to consist, as I have mentioned above, in some idea of conceptual continuity based on capitalist latencies in earlier societies. Anyway, Marx’s own claim that the *dialectic* «regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature not less than its momentary existence» (Marx 1890, 20) is at least an argument for further discussion.

⁵⁹ Lukács (1923), 102.

labor and use values⁶⁰. Both, however, also correspond to the two “finite” dimensions of rationality outlined above, which now appear as rooted in the ideology of capitalist economic actors – respectively, the fragmentation of modern science itself into incommensurable «partial systems» and Kant’s dichotomy between facts and values, ascertained realities and self-positing norms, or, in other words, the bourgeois oscillation between the voluntarism of the unrestricted individual and the «contemplative» fatalism toward social relations perceived as *purely given*. According to Lukács, the alternative «active» attitude only belongs, in principle if not empirically, to the «standpoint of the proletariat» as a Marxian «universal class», which, therefore, does not constitute a *partial* perspective in the sense of the «partisanship of science» criticized by Heinrich⁶¹, but the very opposite, namely the suppression of *all* reified «partiality». For here the worker, being him- or herself the commodity labor power, can act as «the *self-consciousness of the commodity*» and, thereby, as the «self-knowledge [...] of the capitalist society founded upon the production and exchange of commodities»⁶². Due to its special function in the capitalist production process, the proletariat is – virtually at least – in a position to *mediate* fragment and whole on one hand, subjective forms and objective contents on the other, thus *totalizing* both history and society into a self-transparent movement whose logic, as human-made, has an immanent *normative* dimension.

In Lukács’s account, therefore, all four features that Heinrich ascribes to the theoretical field of political economy are criticized, but a *fifth* one emerges that seems to be equally co-essential to bourgeois thought as such – namely *objectivism* as the «contemplative» dialectical counterpart of individualism, resting on the unmediated opposition between subjective agency and inert given objects that are externally subsumed under both logical and ethical «forms». Now, Lukács was the first to acknowledge not only the relevance of Marx’s chapter on the fetish character of the commodity, but specifically, as can be seen from the quoted passages, the constitutive role of the indirect socialization of private labor. Given this affinity in basic assumptions, one might expect that the logical sequence of Heinrich’s argument also presents an element at some point that allows for a similar overcoming of objectivism.

Indeed it does and this element appears at the very outset. Heinrich’s conceptual starting point, the notion of a «specific social relation», is only seemingly “value-free”. For to claim of a *present* social relation that it is specific is to say that it differs from others. But if this difference is not to be limited to a comparison with *past* alternatives, it must imply that the relation in question can also be transcended. This *possibility* is itself all but empirically given, and the usual century-old Marxist inference from “historical specificity” – the capitalist mode of production arose in history, *then* it can also decline – is not, strictly speaking, justified. Without this inference, however, what is “specific” in the present can always be seen as the mere teleological accomplishment of what already existed imperfectly in the past. No empirically *ascertained* “historicity” is immune to the bourgeois objection that «there has been history, but there is no longer any»⁶³. Whether a relation is «socially specific», therefore, is not an empirical but a philosophical question. It cannot simply be *observed* but must at the same time be *decided*. “At the same time” – for the whole point here is that this “decision” *comes together* with an increase in objective knowledge, *with neither aspect taking priority over the other*. In the last chapter of *The Science of Value*, Heinrich argues against authors such as Klaus Hartmann and Ernst Michael Lange, who defend the existence of an implicit normative *foundation* in the critique of political economy. *All* of his critiques are correct, inasmuch as these authors *share with him* the postulate of the mutual externality of knowledge and interest – so that no other option remains than a «political critique» in which any properly cognitive content is absorbed or, conversely, a purely «scientific critique» to be *later* integrated into an independent normative stance as the factual premise of a practical syllogism. Heinrich is right, in particular, to

⁶⁰ For a more detailed analysis, see Zanotti (2023).

⁶¹ Heinrich (1999), 504.

⁶² Lukács (1923), 168.

⁶³ Marx (1890), 92, f. 1.

claim against Lange that «immediately social production» is not an ideal «essence» on whose standard Marx negatively judges commodity fetishism, since the latter concept «does not enter as a critique of an inverted socialization, but as a critique of an inverted conception of the existing socialization»⁶⁴. However, as Heinrich restates soon after, such inverted conception is a *necessary* product of the existing socialization – and the determination of this relation as a *constraint* is the point where fact and value overlap. The idea of an «association of free human beings» does disclose the conceptual horizon of the critique of political economy, because only in its light can the retroactive socialization of private labor be *perceived* as such and *conceived* as a distinct *relation*, rather than assumed as an obvious given that differs from past forms only as the fulfillment of their latent nature. The universal «standpoint» of human freedom makes visible the *necessities* proceeding from indirect socialization as from their initial and contingent condition, in the exposition of which the scientificity of *Capital* consists – the necessity of exchange to abstract from concrete labor, of abstract labor to be represented as money, of money to transform itself into capital, and so on. But it does not *ground* the truth of these transitions – for, by illuminating them as constraints, it reveals them as what they *are*.

The entire point of Heinrich’s own epistemological concern is that concepts do not refer directly to empirical objects but have a constitutive dimension – they establish a scientific field in the first place. As he superbly shows, Marx’s inaugural *choice* is to reverse the question of bourgeois economy – instead of starting with value as a natural given to then demonstrate a “labor theory of value”, he starts with value as a specific social mediation of labor to then ask for its conditions of possibility⁶⁵. If, therefore, the new field thus constituted provides a better account of the capitalist mode of production – in terms of constructivist epistemologies: it has greater explanatory power –, it does so at the same time, *and for the same reason*, that it turns its interest to a different practical horizon, namely because, by doing both, it accedes to a *higher degree of rationality* – itself rooted in the material conditions actually present in modern society. Within this more comprehensive rational dimension – the perspective of freedom from second nature as a historical achievement –, normative and cognitive contents converge into an outcome in which they are no more distinguishable from each other than are the contributions of values in production prices. In turn, the overcoming of the fact-norm dichotomy brings with it the overcoming of the other separation identified by Lukács, namely that between scientific «partial systems», no longer maintained in incommensurable distance but ordered into a logical dynamic, so that, for example, the critique of political economy can appear as the *truth of both* bourgeois economy and Hegel – for this very truth to which they are all oriented is now identified with freedom *without ceasing to be truth*. Accordingly, rather than: «There can be a *scientific socialism* but not a *socialist science*»⁶⁶, it should be said: there can be no (social) *science* that is not “socialist”.

6. This, perhaps, can also indirectly explain Heinrich’s somehow surprising short-circuit in his very last paragraph, titled: *Theory of Value and Conception of Socialism*⁶⁷. It is the only passage in the book where his otherwise so stringent reasoning seems to be properly self-contradictory, in that here he misapplies his own monetary theory of value. When critically discussing the concept of social planning in the history of political Marxism, Heinrich attempts to trace some of its degenerations back to theoretical inadequacies of Marx and Engels themselves. Heinrich’s *secondary* arguments about their overestimation of the efficacy and underestimation of the authoritarian risks of central planning, their disregard for the disruptive effects of increases in productive forces, for the political organization form of socialism, for different group interests, and so on, may well be compelling. However, none of them has a relationship of logical implication

⁶⁴ Heinrich (1999), 493.

⁶⁵ Ivi, chapter 6.1.

⁶⁶ Ivi, 504.

⁶⁷ Ivi, chapter 9.3.

with Heinrich’s main point, which is to show that the *same* «ambivalences of the critique of political economy» exposed in the previous chapters «acted on the conception of socialism» of its founders⁶⁸.

He first quotes a passage from Engels’s *Anti-Dühring*, which states that in an immediately social form of production «the amount of social labor contained in a product does not have to be determined in a roundabout way», but society can directly calculate the average necessary labor time and allocate labor activities accordingly, so that «people do everything very simply without the famous “value” in between»⁶⁹. Heinrich comments on: «Engels assumes that society under socialism *knows* the amount of labor required to produce the various goods and *therefore* these labor quanta no longer need to be expressed as value. [...] Engels thus implicitly assumes that the quantities of *concrete* labor expended determine the value magnitude of the products already *before* the exchange»⁷⁰ – that is, he presupposes a pre-monetary theory of value. This inference is inconsistent both in itself and with Engels’s argument. Engels here is not discussing how socially necessary labor time determines *value* in an exchange-based society – whether prior to or simultaneously with exchange – but precisely why «the amount of social labor contained in a product» does not assume a *value-form* in a society where exchange does not occur. If, for him, the labor quanta no longer need to be expressed as value under socialism, it is not *because* society knows the average labor time. Rather, the reason for *both* society knowing the average labor time *and* this labor time not being expressed in value is that now society *exists* as a subject capable of knowledge in the first place – in other words, that labor is not private and, therefore, its socialization no longer depends on the market. Engels does explicitly assume that in a planned economy socially necessary labor time can be fully known *ex ante* in its technological dimension and, implicitly, that the same holds for its societal dimension – namely that which depends on overall social need – insofar as the planning is precisely supposed to suppress any discrepancies between demand and supply. Whether or not these two assumptions are justified is a separate question on which – for both dimensions – the technical possibility of a more or less efficient (productive) allocation of concrete labor in socialism depends. It is, however, completely unrelated to the (distributive) allocation of *abstract* labor in capitalism and, thus, to the monetary or pre-monetary character of *value-theory*. For the problem with a pre-monetary theory of value is not of *technical* calculability by a collective economic agency that does not exist as such in a commodity-based production, but the *structural* fact that the single producer does not know the amount of socially necessary labor time either in its technological or in its societal aspect, from which it follows: 1) that labor time must be expressed in money – not directly as labor time, the way Proudhon would have it – *and* 2) that the value magnitude cannot be determined prior to exchange. *Both* of these consequences are absent in a planned economy regardless of the extent to which socially necessary concrete labor – not the value magnitude – can be known in advance. Neither theory of value can be attributed to Engels *in this passage* for the simple reason that here the mediation of value is out of question altogether.

Heinrich then criticizes Marx’s conjectures in the *Critique of the Gotha Program* on the «first phase» of communist society «as it emerges from capitalist society», still related to the latter in that «the same amount of labor which [one] has given to society in one form he receives back in another»⁷¹. Although Heinrich discusses the two passages together, here Marx is addressing a different problem than Engels, namely the allocation of produced goods during the «first phase». In this hybrid historical form, retribution is proportional to individual labor time, but, since this is conceived as actually expended concrete labor, no reference to any dimension of socially necessary labor time – whether technological or societal – is implied. It is in this sense that Marx writes: «the

⁶⁸ Ivi, 506.

⁶⁹ Engels (1878) cit. Heinrich (1999), 509-510.

⁷⁰ Heinrich (1999), 510.

⁷¹ Marx (1875) cit. Heinrich (1999), 511.

exchange of equivalents in commodity exchange exists only *on the average* and not [as labor equivalence in planned distribution, G.Z.] in the individual case»⁷². Still, «the same principle prevails as in the exchange of commodity-equivalents: a given amount of labor in one form is exchanged for an equal amount of labor in another form»⁷³. Heinrich concludes from this: «Marx also assumes not only that the quantities of labor expended on the production of individual goods are *known*, but also that they are *directly comparable*. [...] In this phase, therefore, it is not the *equivalence* of commodity exchange that is to be abolished, but merely the market as a mediating instance»⁷⁴. It is precisely the market as a mediating instance, however, that establishes the equivalence of commodity exchange, namely in terms of a reduction to abstract labor existing as a social property of the commodity. In socialism, by contrast – whether in its «first» or «second phase» –, commodity exchange does not take place; here, therefore, the *principle* of its equivalence cannot but have a different social function. In another passage quoted by Heinrich, Marx claims in more exact terms than Engels:

Within the co-operative society based on common ownership of the means of production, the producers do not exchange their products; just as little does the labor employed on the products appear here as the value of these products, as an objective quality possessed by them, since now, in contrast to capitalist society, individual labor no longer exists in an indirect fashion but directly as a component part of the total labor⁷⁵.

Since the socialization of labor is no longer mediated by exchange, its equivalence no longer needs to be established by the money-form and can be directly expressed in labor time, as Proudhon wanted it. Yet the point is that – *contra* Proudhon – this is only possible once the commodity-form has also been overcome. Insofar as *different labor is equated*, an abstraction indeed occurs, and it is precisely in being “proudhonian” that this «first phase» is still «bourgeois» – namely, as Marx famously writes here, still burdened by the abstract principle of «*equal right*», actually «an unequal right for unequal labor», «*a right to inequality [...] like every right*», in that it reduces different labor to a common measure and human beings in turn to their own labor⁷⁶. Insofar, however, as equal labor *does not need to be manifest as a property of the product*, this abstraction is itself just an allocation tool, namely a specific way of *immediately social* distribution. Among other possible criteria, society chooses that everyone will receive an amount of use value produced by concrete labor of equal duration to what he or she has expended. Here for the first time, one might say, labor equivalence actually becomes what Engels incorrectly considers it to be in its capitalist value-form in the passage criticized by Heinrich, that is, a mere technical «expedient» (*Nothbehelf*)⁷⁷. For here – to summarize the central difference – there is *abstraction from* concrete labor, but there is no *abstract labor* as the substance of value. It is, thus, wrong to affirm that «*Marx also assumes a non-monetary theory of value when he wants to abolish commodity production*»⁷⁸ – because, in the absence of commodity production, one needs *no* theory of value whatsoever. Heinrich objects to Marx that the equality of individual labor «is a social property that does not simply exist, but must first be *produced*», something of which Marx and Engels do not say how it should happen «in a mode of production not based on commodity production»⁷⁹. The answer is in the «first phase»: by measuring how long everyone works. It is true that labor equivalence is first to be produced, but to do so under non-fetishistic conditions is «a very trivial thing, and easily understood» (however unsatisfactory for other reasons and calling to be transcended into the «second phase»). Again, as in

⁷² Marx (1875), 15.

⁷³ Marx (1875) cit. Heinrich (1999), 511.

⁷⁴ Heinrich (1999), 511-512.

⁷⁵ Marx (1875) cit. in Heinrich (1999), 511, f. 17.

⁷⁶ Marx (1875), 15..

⁷⁷ Engels (1878) cit. Heinrich (1999), 509.

⁷⁸ Heinrich (1999), 512.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*.

the case of Engels, Heinrich overlaps specific problems of principle arising on the ground of commodity production with practical issues concerning neither value nor exchange, nor, consequently, whether value can be established and/or known prior to exchange.

Heinrich’s conclusion of both his argument and his book appears to further develop the same misunderstanding:

Building on the monetary theory of value, the possibility of complete social planning cannot be ruled out. Still, it becomes clear how immense the coordination and adjustment efforts are that would then have to be carried out in the shortest possible time. If, on the other hand, one adopts a non-monetary theory of value, the problems of this coordination are also ignored due to the simplifying ideas about the market. [...]

The monetary theory of value rather suggests a cooperative production, whose overall social coordination cannot be established by a (both omniscient and timelessly reacting) center, but which requires its own mediating media. These, however, must be socially controlled if the old commodity production and thus, ultimately, the capital relation are not to be re-established⁸⁰.

Based on what I have argued thus far, I believe that here, too, Heinrich is mixing two completely distinct planes. However justified his concerns about the historical shortcomings and conceptual challenges of socialist planning as a social mediation of labor and however plausible – though somewhat indeterminate – the solutions he envisages, neither has the slightest connection to monetary or non-monetary «ideas about the market» and value, since market and value are by definition excluded from a rigorous concept of plan. The monetary theory of value simply has nothing to do with any of that.

I have discussed this passage at some length because the problem of the transition to a post-capitalist social order is precisely the point where theory and practice come into contact at Heinrich’s level of abstraction. His slip here may arise from a desire to say something about subjective practice based on his own theory. However, as I have claimed, this theory still rests on the objectivist conception of a static relation between subject and object and, therefore, of the transition from facts to values as a logical *leap*. Heinrich’s understanding of the critique of political economy *per se* knows no subjects at all, as he himself seems to confirm when he approvingly quotes Althusser’s definition of history as a «process without a subject»⁸¹. History as subjectless, however, is history as itself the subject – as the «automatic subject» (a phrase of Marx cited by many, but less often acknowledged as a deliberate contradiction in terms)⁸². Heinrich’s theory only properly speaks of capital – as an univocally objective relation between individual “character masks”. It therefore tries, as it were, to surrogate the absence of an *internal* practical dimension with the deduction of political «consequences» from «scientific results». At this level of abstraction, however, theory can certainly provide «political critique» with *negative* consequences about the objective conditions not to be reproduced, but by no means positive indications of the kind hinted at in the last lines quoted above⁸³. The real point, then, is whether one conceives of the object of theory as an accomplished whole to which the subjective moment is added at the end out of nowhere, «like a shot from a pistol», or whether one retrieves this same subjective moment as constitutive through the entire conceptual development. For that purpose, the dichotomy of theory and practice has to be denied *within* the categories themselves. The “normative” content has to be recognized as immanent to the logic of capital in the «living bearers of the commodity labour power»⁸⁴. It is in this sense, it seems to me, that Riccardo Bellofiore insists on the irreducibility of the category of «living labor power» to both «labor power» and «living labor» as pivotal to the

⁸⁰ Ivi, 512-513.

⁸¹ Ivi, 247.

⁸² See Bellofiore (2025), 28.

⁸³ See Zanotti (2022), 246.

⁸⁴ Bellofiore (2025), 25.

reconstruction of the critique of political economy⁸⁵. It is in this sense, too, that for Lukács the worker can only be a potential «self-consciousness of the commodity» by experiencing the opposition of use value and value on his or her own skin in the dimension of labor time⁸⁶. Hence if it is true, as stated by Heinrich (and Lukács), that in capitalist society all classes are subject to fetishism⁸⁷, not every class, though, is subject to it *in the same way*. All that theory can say about socialism is to point to the subjective layer of indeterminacy consisting in the creative potential for struggle at workplaces and contained in the science of value from its very beginning.

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⁸⁵ Ivi, § 4.9, 6.

⁸⁶ See Lukács (1923), 166-168.

⁸⁷ Heinrich (1999), 422-423.

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