

Of ‘Real’ Abstraction: Social Theory and the Objects of Intellectual History

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In some ways, Samuel Moyn’s 2014 criticisms of intellectual history’s implicit idealism repeat the standard charge that intellectual historians, committed to the ‘transcendence of concepts,’ neglect the social conditions of possibility for intellectual production to the point of ‘self-imprisonment in... language alone.’ But rather than appeal to a reality somehow external and prior to thought (structure, social context), Moyn advocates an overcoming of the ‘distinction between representations and practices’—a venture that would require a foray into the domain of social theory.¹ While my paper pursues this suggestion, it takes a different path than Moyn himself. I’d like to discuss the Marxian notion of real abstraction, introduced by Frankfurt School fellow traveler Alfred Sohn-Rethel.² The term has experienced a resurgence of interest in contemporary social theory,³ and has recently appeared in one intellectual historian’s work on the history of political economy (Andrew Sartori: to be discussed later). I’ll want to point out a potential difficulty with the notion, which will lead to a short reflection on the relationship between *historicity* and *legitimacy* in the history of ideas. Mostly, though, I hope to show that in Sartori’s elaboration, real abstraction does not entail a naïve reduction of ideas to social practices on the assumption that the social is what necessarily conditions our ‘reality.’ Rather, it articulates a claim about the historical specificity of capitalist modernity: only in capitalist society, we might say, does the social come to structure the experience of ‘reality.’ It’s not until the eighteenth century that ‘society’ emerges as a foundational concept to express the

¹ Samuel Moyn, ‘Imaginary Intellectual History,’ in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 112, 114.

² While Sohn-Rethel introduced the term to the Marxian tradition, he didn’t coin it. According to Helmut Reichelt, it was coined by Georg Simmel in the latter’s *Philosophy of Money*. See Reichelt, “Marx’s Critique of Economic Categories,” *Historical Materialism* 15 (2007), 4. And see Simmel, *Philosophy of Money*, trans. David Frisby (London: Routledge Classics, 2011), 84. There have also been comparable attempts in philosophical traditions very different from Marxism to distinguish between abstractions that correspond somehow intrinsically to ‘reality’ and those that are merely formal. Wilhelm Dilthey, for example, distinguished between ‘real’ and ‘formal’ categories. Charles Bambach explains: ‘Formal categories are grounded in reason itself as an abstract, timeless form of consciousness, for example, identity, difference, causality, substance, and so forth. Real categories, on the other hand, are “not grounded in reason but in the life-nexus itself” and hence serve as “life-categories” rather than as calcified formal relations of pure reason.’ See the discussion in Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 165.

³ See, for example, Alberto Toscano, *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (New York: Verso, 2010); Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004); Roberto Finelli, *Astrazione e dialettica dal romanticismo al capitalismo (saggio su Marx)*, ed. Ali Rattansi (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 1987); and Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2008 [1989]). See also Moishe Postone’s critique of Sohn-Rethel in Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 177-79.

radically new, impersonal matrices of abstract social interdependence characteristic of modern life. And as I'll elaborate in much greater detail, in this account, it's in modernity that *social practices themselves become essentially abstract*—what Dipesh Chakrabarty has termed the 'concrete performance of the work of abstraction.'⁴ This means that the possibility of a relationship between conceptual abstractions and social practices that is not reducible to mere formal homology is a specifically modern one. It means that in modernity, and only in modernity, certain conceptual abstractions—real abstractions—come to describe 'empiricities' of social life that are themselves abstract.⁵

But let's take a step back. I'll begin with Sohn-Rethel's introduction of the term to the Marxian tradition, and then engage briefly with the work of Moishe Postone, whose reading of Marx's category of abstract labor fundamentally informs Sartori's notion of real abstraction (tellingly, Sartori does not cite Sohn-Rethel). And I'll close the paper with a discussion of Sartori.

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Theodor W. Adorno once wrote that Sohn-Rethel's work marked 'the greatest intellectual upheaval I have experienced in the philosophical field since my first encounter with Benjamin.' Of course, Sohn-Rethel's ideas wouldn't enjoy a fate comparable to those of Benjamin, not least because Max Horkheimer had a rather different (read: scathing) assessment of their merit, contributing to Sohn-Rethel's peripherality to the Institute for Social Research.⁶ Sohn-Rethel's basic project, which had its origin in his university studies but preoccupied him over the entire course of his sporadic intellectual production, was to historicize the Kantian transcendental subject: 'Kant was right in his belief that the basic constituents of our form of cognition are preformed and issue from a prior origin, but he was wrong in attributing this preformation to the mind itself engaged in the phantasmagorical performance of "transcendental synthesis *a priori*," locatable neither in time nor in place.' In particular, he thought he could ground the transcendental subject in a form of practical or

⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Universalism and Belonging in the Logic of Capital," *Public Culture* 12, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 659.

⁵ Andrew Sartori, 'Global Intellectual History and the History of Political Economy,' in *Global Intellectual History*, ed. Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 110.

⁶ Adorno wrote this in a letter to Sohn-Rethel dated 17 November, 1936. *Theodor W. Adorno und Alfred Sohn-Rethel Briefwechsel, 1936-1969*, ed. Christoph Gödde (Munich: edition text + kritik, 1991), 32. Adorno enthusiastically suggested to Max Horkheimer that the Institute for Social Research financially support Sohn-Rethel's work, but Horkheimer objected, writing, among other things, that Sohn-Rethel's work is 'eternally tiresome and uninteresting': 'Nowhere is the characteristic irony of the Marxian categories operative; nowhere does their critical function appear.' This letter is reprinted in the *Adorno und Sohn-Rethel Briefwechsel*, pgs. 38-41, and helps explain Sohn-Rethel's lack of Institute funding. However, it seems that Sohn-Rethel's ideas had a continued influence on Adorno. Just one year before his death, Adorno spoke of the exchange abstraction as an abstraction that 'lies not in the abstracting mode of thought of the sociologist, but in society itself. Or, if you will permit me to use this term... something like a "concept" is implicit in society in its objective form.' See Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, ed. Christoph Gödde, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 31-2.

effective abstraction at work in the exchange relation, an ‘abstraction other than by thought’ critically grasped by Kantian epistemology but misrecognized as inhering in the spontaneous activity of mind itself.⁷

The *act* of exchange, Sohn-Rethel argues (following, of course, the analysis of the commodity-form in *Capital*), necessarily engenders a double abstraction that typically remains unthought. First, an abstraction from the concrete, qualitative determinations of the objects exchanged. The quantitative commensurability of commodities, on which market transactions are based, presumes their qualitative equivalence—presumes, that is, a prior abstraction from qualitatively specific properties (a suspension/bracketing of difference). Second, an abstraction from the material changeability of the commodity during the act of exchange. The most revealing example here is money itself. Money is a commodity that we understand to be the very medium of exchange, and whose *material* properties therefore seem to us a matter of irrelevance (I don’t care if I spill a splotch of ink on my dollar bill).

Again, for Sohn-Rethel, these abstractions are practical rather than conceptual. Their existence doesn’t in any sense depend, he would say, on their appropriation by thought: ‘it is the action of exchange, and the action alone, that is abstract.’ Exchange, he suggests, is characterized by a formal split between a realm of pure quantity, evacuated of material contents (perpetually occupied by money), and the time- and space-bound realm of use. So for Sohn-Rethel, real abstraction is located in exchange, in circulation. It’s *money* that serves as ‘the reflecting medium of the real abstraction,’ that he therefore invokes to ground philosophical abstractions: ‘I define the Kantian transcendental subject as a fetish concept of the capital function of money.’⁸ For Sohn-Rethel, *philosophical abstraction itself* may be traced historically to the rise of coinage in ancient Greece and the corresponding expansion of exchange in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.; the genesis of the autonomous intellect (the separation of intellectual and manual labor) and of the logical autonomy of philosophy, not to mention the birth of ‘nature’ as such, understood as a pure and isolable object world, are deemed efforts to grasp in thought the social divergence of use (concrete particularity, sensuous materiality) and value (abstract quantity).⁹ Kant’s a priori frame of knowledge, the network of transcendental categories, is seen as the culmination of a history of philosophical abstraction. (A culmination because philosophical abstraction has intensified with the increasing generalization of the exchange

⁷ Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1978 [1970]), 7, 17.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 28, 77.

⁹ See *ibid.*, 28, 32n. This is an argument that runs through the book, but it’s stated succinctly here.

relation.) Sohn-Rethel's aim is to give lie to the logical autonomy of philosophy while preserving something like an a priori frame of knowledge—recognizing, however, its historicity and its social constitution.

While Sohn-Rethel constantly affirms the 'historical roots' of thought¹⁰ and understands his project as an effort to historicize philosophical abstraction in general and the transcendental subject in particular, it's not clear how a theory that grounds its 'historicizing' impulse in the exchange relation can be 'historical' at all. After all, as Sohn-Rethel is well aware, exchange was widespread in the ancient world. It seems to me that this is a theory of the conceptual structures rendered plausible by the exchange relation, a theory that's therefore hardly capable of aiding in the historicization of specific thinkers or intellectual currents. Regardless of his intent to establish Kant as 'the classical manifestation of the bourgeois fetishism of intellectual labor,' Sohn-Rethel ends up (inadvertently?) positioning Kant's philosophy as an exemplary realization of epistemological possibilities socially viable since the sixth century B.C.

To my knowledge, Georg Lukács doesn't use the term 'real abstraction.' But in his classic 'Reification' essay, he aims to historicize Kant's critical philosophy in a manner that avoids some of these pitfalls. Lukács argues that the unknowability of the concrete in Kant's system (that is, the irreducibility of the noumenal realm) is precisely symptomatic of a form of social life structured by the commodity-form. The bracketing of qualitative specificity required by the commodity-form (its abstraction from sensuous, concrete materiality) corresponds to a form of knowledge that concedes the incomprehensibility of the thing-in-itself.¹¹ What's important for this paper, though, is that Lukács doesn't try to ground the Kantian antinomies in the exchange relation per se, but rather in the historically specific social forms of capitalist modernity (here, the commodity-form).¹² To put it somewhat cryptically at first, it's possible to draw a distinction in Lukács between commodities and *the* commodity-form. Of course (and as we've seen), commodities as such are in no way peculiar to capitalist modernity. The commodity-form, however, is what arises when the commodity becomes the fundamental social form structuring human interdependence. And the commodity-form emerges in this general sense only with the arrival of capitalist modernity (when commodity production

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹¹ See Lukács' lengthy discussion of the 'antinomies of bourgeois thought' in 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,' in *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), 110-148.

¹² See the well-known opening paragraph of Lukács' 'Reification' essay in which he writes: 'the problem of commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem in economics, but as the central, structuring problem of capitalist society in all its aspects. Only in this case can the structure of commodity-relations be made to yield a model of all the objective forms of bourgeois society together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them.' *Ibid.*, 83.

becomes the dominant form of production). What's more, if the commodity-*form* is a specifically modern phenomenon, it's at least worth asking whether its *content* is historically specific, too. This is what the thinkers I'll examine in the remainder of this paper will do. It will require leaving Sohn-Rethel's world of circulation and entering 'the hidden abode of production,' in which we may find a notion of real abstraction more interesting to historians.¹³

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First, though, an interlude. I mentioned earlier that part of what I want to suggest in this paper is that the more sophisticated Marxian elaborations of real abstraction don't merely presume that something called 'the social' is the fundamental determinant of human experience (and that ideas should therefore be contextualized with reference to the structures of social life). Instead, they imply that the same historically determinate social forms that ground real abstractions, the social forms of capitalist modernity, *also* at once (1) render plausible the concept of 'society' as a means of grasping order, and (2) do indeed establish the social as the basic, structuring principle of human experience. Such theories, then, don't *assume* the social as the relevant ground for the contextualization of modern ideas; they attempt to reflexively justify this choice. I won't really be able to defend this claim until I've introduced the work of Postone and Sartori, but I'd like to point out that it doesn't apply to Sohn-Rethel, who, as I've indicated, is not especially interested in the historical specificity of modern social life because of his narrow emphasis on the exchange relation. This means that he isn't able to offer any compelling reason why the 'real' in real abstraction should be located in the social, or why the social should serve as the most important 'context' for the historicization of ideas (rather than, say, culture, a discursive field, political circumstances, or the intentions of an author).

What, then, do I mean by the social? Keith Baker writes: 'The Enlightenment invented society as the symbolic representation of collective human existence and instituted it as the essential domain of human practice.' The social, he suggests, 'replace[d] religion as the ultimate ground of order, the ontological frame of human existence'—it's 'our name for the "*really real*,"' what William Sewell has called the 'totality of complex interrelatedness that we understand as constituting the basic reality of human existence.'¹⁴ Patrick Joyce observes: 'The social is not only ambiguous and polysemous, but

¹³ This is the well-known quote from Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 279-80.

¹⁴ Keith Baker, 'Enlightenment and the Institution of Society: Notes for a Conceptual History, in *Main Trends in Cultural History: Ten Essays*, ed. Willem Melching and Wyger Velema (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 1994), 113, 96. Note that as a cultural historian, Baker is clearly not defending the primacy of the social—he's trying to trace its genealogy and grapple with the peculiar force of the concept. And William Sewell, *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 326.

also peculiarly vague and indeed mysterious. This is perhaps related to its emergence out of a framework of religion.¹⁵ For all their differences, these three historians seem to agree that ‘society’ was a product of the Enlightenment: secular, autonomous, self-regulating;¹⁶ perhaps a displacement of religious conceptions of order. They seem to agree that the social becomes, in this period, *the* basic frame for comprehending human reality—to repeat Baker’s phrase, the ‘really real.’ And they seem to agree that it points to something peculiarly indeterminate and elusive: in Sewell’s words, ‘the concept of “the social” is vague and mysterious because it still carries a whiff of the divine.’¹⁷

Postone and Sartori would concur that the social emerges in this period as a way of grasping the basic ground of human reality, the ‘really real’ (and therefore the reference point for the ‘real’ in real abstraction). But they would explain its appearance differently. While I see no reason why they would need to deny the religious residues Baker, Sewell, and Joyce identify in the concept, as we’ll see, they understand the invention of society as an effort to grasp the relationships of abstract interdependence that characterize an emergent social world organized around the commodity-form. And as we’ll see, this approach generates a very different interpretation of the ‘vagueness’ of the social. For, as Marx famously proposed in the first volume of *Capital*, the commodity-form wouldn’t be the commodity-form if it didn’t mystify and conceal the social relationships that constitute it.

Before returning to the main trajectory of this paper, I’d like to discuss an issue raised by the notion of real abstraction that’s relevant to recent debates about contextualization in intellectual history. It concerns the relationship between historicization and delegitimation. Does disclosing the historicity of an idea necessarily ‘exhaust’ it, to use Peter Gordon’s term, problematically rendering it ‘legitimate’ only in the specific historical context in which it was produced—or render it ‘illegitimate’ entirely, because of the questionable circumstances of its genesis?¹⁸ This is a particularly acute problem in Marxian critique because Marxism is itself a critical discourse about the social forms and structures it then uses to historicize ideas—so does historicizing an idea in a Marxian frame implicitly delegitimize the idea by revealing its complicity in the reproduction of the capitalist social world? There is, after all, no necessary relation between epistemological validity and social origin. Is Sohn-Rethel’s claim that the genesis of the transcendental subject depends on the exchange relation

¹⁵ Patrick Joyce, ‘What is the Social in Social History?’, *Past and Present*, no. 206 (Feb. 2010), 224.

¹⁶ Jonathan Sheehan and Dror Wahrman have suggested that the Enlightenment invention of society marked one instance of a much broader emergence of discourses of what they call self-organization. See *Invisible Hands: Self-Organization and the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), esp. 234.

¹⁷ Sewell, *Logics*, 326.

¹⁸ Peter Gordon, “Contextualism and Criticism in the History of Ideas,” in *Rethinking Modern European Intellectual History*, ed. Darrin M. McMahon and Samuel Moyn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 44.

really a ‘scandal,’ as Slavoj Žižek has proposed?¹⁹ Does Sartori’s use of Marx to historicize the discourse of political economy teleologically lead to a Marxian delegitimation of that discourse? Of course, this is not only a problem for Marxian histories. Think of the recent historiographical debate about human rights: if Moyn is correct that our contemporary, individualist, supra-political version of human rights emerged only in the 1970s amid the decline of collective visions of utopia—what are we to do with human rights now?²⁰

While these aren’t questions I can answer, I can at least say that I don’t think a Marxian history of political economy is necessarily problematic in the way I’ve just indicated. I don’t think it was ever Marx’s aim to ‘delegitimize’ the discourse of political economy by revealing its historicity. Rather, Marx, a philosopher, adopted the categories of political economy precisely because he believed they revealed something fundamental about the modern world—an emerging world that he thought could be most adequately understood through the categories of political economy. While his project was indeed a critique of political economy, it was a critique in the (loosely) Kantian sense: an attempt to discover its conditions of possibility. And he located, or at least thought he did, these conditions in the new world of ‘society.’

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My aim in what follows can’t be to reconstruct Postone’s ambitious reinterpretation of Marx’s critical theory (or rather, his ‘mature’ critical theory—which, in his account, Marx arrives at only while drafting *Capital* in the 1850s). But I’d like to identify two aspects of this reinterpretation that will be important for Sartori’s elaboration of real abstraction. First, Postone’s emphasis on the category of abstract labor, which (1) locates social abstraction in production rather than (like Sohn-Rethel) in circulation, and (2) grounds these abstractions historically. Second, his claim that capitalism is the first mode of social organization that constitutes a *totality* rather than a disorderly whole, a totality that makes up what I’ve been calling ‘society.’²¹

¹⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2008 [1989]), 13.

²⁰ See Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).

²¹ I mean totality in the Hegelian sense—I’ll elaborate a bit on this in footnote 26. But, although Postone takes a great deal from Lukács (for example, his interest in the commodity-form), the notion of totality he elaborates is decidedly not Lukácsian. Very briefly: Lukács views labor affirmatively. For him, totality *expresses* the praxis of the historical meta-subject, the proletariat. The proletariat alone is capable of recognizing itself in the totality (Vico’s *Verum-Factum* principle), and therefore the proletariat alone is capable of knowing history. The revolution would mark the historical realization of labor as the proletariat recognizes itself in its creation (spatial limits render this all very crude, of course). See Martin Jay’s discussion in *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). Postone, on the contrary, views ‘labor’ as such as a specifically modern social practice and the very locus of social domination in modernity. For him, the world-historical Subject is not the proletariat, but capital. So for Postone, the overcoming of capitalism would entail not the realization but the dissolution of the ‘totality.’

It might be helpful to start with a quote from Marx himself, taken from the *Grundrisse* (the rough draft of *Capital*):

Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference... [In capitalist society] for the first time, the point of departure of modern economics, namely the abstraction of the category “labour,” “labour as such,” labour pure and simple, becomes true in practice. The simplest abstraction, then, which modern economics places at the head of its discussions, and which expresses an immeasurably ancient relation valid in all forms of society, nevertheless achieves practical truth as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society.²²

While it clearly would have been possible to conceive of an activity that could be called ‘labor’ as such—as opposed to, say, shoemaking—in any social configuration, in a pre-capitalist world this would have been achieved by abstracting in thought from the particular determinations of one’s concrete activity. It’s only in ‘the most modern society,’ Marx says, that the shoemaker begins *in practice* to experience his labor not as shoemaking but as ‘labor,’ precisely because shoemaking has become a matter of chance, of indifference—interchangeable, therefore, with any other form of labor.²³

So we can see Marx grappling with what might be specific about modern labor. He’s not trying to say that the *concept* of labor is a specifically modern one. Nor is he saying that the concept ought to be *applied* to modern contexts alone. He’s suggesting that the abstraction, labor, *only adequately describes the practical experience of modern labor*, because moderns experience labor as ‘labor’ in the abstract, detached from its specific determinations (we go to ‘work,’ for example). For Postone, this kind of experience of labor in the abstract is only plausible in a social world structured around the commodity-form in the Lukácsian sense outlined above—that is, when commodity production becomes the dominant form of production. We recall that the quantitative commensurability presumed by commodity exchange assumes, in turn, a prior establishment of qualitative identity. As it turns out, for Marx, this qualitative identity is established through labor (this, of course, is the Labor Theory of Value): *every commodity is a receptacle of a certain amount of labor*, and commodities are

²² Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), 104-5.

²³ Marx attributes this situation—the worker’s indifference towards his particular labor and the resulting situation in which ‘labor’ as such becomes an adequate descriptive category—to a series of social changes born of capitalist development. First, since the mechanization of the labor process eliminates the need for technical skill in production, the worker becomes *capable* of engaging in various forms of labor. Second, because the worker does not consume his product but rather surrenders it for exchange, he ultimately has little reason to concern himself with its particular qualities. And third, as a result of the division of labor within the factory, the individual worker does not by himself produce any complete useful object; his labor is therefore easily detached in thought from its specific end/goal.

commensurable on that basis. But what kind of labor is this? It can only be what Marx calls ‘abstract labor.’ The comparison of commodities on the basis of the amount of labor they contain requires bracketing the differences between the enormously diverse kinds of activity we subsume under the concept of ‘labor.’ Although Postone doesn’t use the expression, then, we might say that in modern society ‘labor’ is a real abstraction.²⁴ The labor that the worker *experiences* practically as an abstraction is, for Marx, the practical expression of a conceptual abstraction that inheres in the very logic of the commodity-form.

Now, it’s clear that for Marx, part of what was radically new about capitalism was the form of abstract social interdependence it initiates. (One depends, via commodity exchange, on the labor of an unfathomable number of people one will never meet. But one isn’t, and can’t be, fully conscious of this interdependence). In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx makes what might initially seem to be a mundane point: that the value of a commodity is determined with reference to *socially necessary labor time* (the labor of a perfectly average worker, with perfectly average tools).²⁵ This means, however, that every act of commodity exchange (each ascertainment of a commodity’s value) implicitly references the total (abstract, homogenous) labor of society. It means that each concrete act of exchange presumes the existence of, and is mediated by, this totality of abstract labor (‘society’ at large). This is what leads Postone to write that any individual instance of abstract labor is ‘an individuated *moment* of a qualitatively homogenous, general social mediation constituting a *social totality*.’²⁶ We might object that any social configuration can be conceptualized as a whole. But Postone wants to argue that the mediation of abstract labor itself binds individuals in capitalist

²⁴ See Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), esp. Chapter 4.

²⁵ ‘The labour that forms the substance of value is equal human labour, the expenditure of identical human labour-power. The total labour-power of society, which is manifested in the values of the world of commodities, counts here as one homogenous mass of human labour-power, although composed of innumerable individual units of labour-power. Each of these units is the same as any other, to the extent that it has the character of a socially average unit of labour-power and acts as such, i.e. only needs, in order to produce a commodity, the labour time which is necessary on an average, or in other words is socially necessary. Socially necessary labour-time is the labour-time required to produce any use-value under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society.’ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 129.

²⁶ Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 152. Postone also develops a sophisticated argument concerning Marx’s historicization of Hegel’s system, and specifically Hegel’s notion of totality. He argues that what Hegel misrecognizes as an ‘ontological’ totality (and therefore for the negativity of reality as such) is actually the totality of a historically determinate social formation, capitalism—the totality of a specific contradictory mode of social existence. In basing his dialectical method in the social forms of capitalism, Marx implies that what Hegel mistakes for the negativity of reality as such is in fact the negativity of a determinate mode of social life. Postone notes that Marx explicitly appropriates language associated with Hegel’s *Geist*, the world-historical Subject. Marx’s Subject is *capital*, which unfolds within the historically specific totality of capitalist society. Like Hegel’s *Geist*, capital’s movement is irreducible to individuals, who are merely instrumental in its unfolding.

society together in a way that is socially *real* rather than merely the product of a conceptual subsumption (as in the case, for example, of ‘feudalism’).

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So far, besides sketching a very partial genealogy of the notion, I’ve tried to outline a Marxian theoretical frame that, I think, informs Sartori’s elaboration of real abstraction. It’s to his work that I’ll now turn, in a concluding section that I hope will provoke a conversation about this approach’s value for intellectual historians—and about how we might think (or *if* we need to think) about the relationship between ideas and social practices.

I’ll focus on the article in which Sartori introduces his version of real abstraction: ‘Global Intellectual History and the History of Political Economy,’ published in the *Global Intellectual History* volume of 2013. ‘In Marx’s critical evaluation,’ he writes, ‘the power of political-economic discourse lay in its capacity to grasp real abstractions (abstractions posited at the level of practical activity itself) and, whether or not adequately, to connect the objective force of these abstractions to the structure of social organization as a whole.’²⁷ Sartori is specifically interested in the discourse of political economy because he understands it (following Marx) as an effort to conceptualize the forms of social abstraction that constitute the relationships of impersonal interdependence characteristic of capitalist modernity. In this view, political-economic concepts don’t merely abstract from the rich particularities of social life (they *aren’t* what Sartori variously calls taxonomic abstractions, following Ann Stoler, or generalizations). Rather, these are concepts that can’t be understood historically or epistemologically ‘without recognizing the importance of their referential relation to a peculiar form of historical object, an object that is itself abstract.’²⁸

But what kind of historical object is this? Following Postone, Sartori thinks that in the Marxian reading, the locus of real abstraction is not in circulation (Sohn-Rethel) but in production—in the forms of abstract interdependence rooted in the socially mediating function of the kind of labor, abstract labor, which arises with the generalization of commodity production. Much of Sartori’s discussion here turns on his conception of the global and his attempt to specify the role played by capitalism in the circulation of concepts. When Sartori uses the concept of the ‘global,’ he does *not* mean ‘globalization’ if that term refers to ‘a unilateral trajectory toward deepening interconnections and integration, toward convergence and homogeneity under the umbrella of multinational and/or

²⁷ Andrew Sartori, ‘Global Intellectual History and the History of Political Economy,’ in *Global Intellectual History*, ed. Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 113.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 124.

finance capital.²⁹ His conception of the global hinges not on the expansion of a ‘world market’ but on the spread of capitalist social forms and social relations. It’s in the context of commodity production (and, therefore, abstract labor) that the real abstraction of labor becomes a *socially mediating practice* and begins to objectively structure social relationships. And it’s in such a context that political-economic concepts begin to have purchase.³⁰ But Sartori is also insistent that concepts apparently unrelated to political economy may be used to grasp the real abstractions introduced by the penetration of capitalist social forms (depending on what discourses and concepts are locally available to negotiate their penetration).³¹

Sartori writes: ‘Political economy must be understood as a discourse whose intellectual history has been constitutively bound to the history of the modern emergence of “the social” as a realm of objective interdependence grounded in the socially mediating role of labor.’ If, in the Marxian reading he outlines, the genesis of the social is identified with the emergence of human relations based on abstract interdependence (itself identified with the generalization of the commodity-form), then the discourse of classical political economy is, perhaps above all, an attempt to grapple with the emergence of the social as *the* new structuring principle of human ‘reality.’ It’s to Sartori’s credit that he not only links the appearance of political economy to that of the social, but also attempts to reflexively justify his insistence on the primacy of the social by arguing that, *in capitalist society*, the social comes to ‘stand for the set of practical relations in which subjectivity and ideation assume their significance and intelligibility.’³² What’s more, as I’ve already hinted, the intrinsic link between the genesis of the social and the generalization of the commodity-form seems to offer an explanation for the peculiarly ‘vague’ quality of the social identified by Baker, Sewell, and Joyce above: because the commodity-form veils the concrete social relationships that constitute it, society doesn’t end up appearing ‘social’ at all. Rather, as Sewell puts it, the ‘sense of society as a reified totality is surely the predominant contemporary usage of the term both in academic and ordinary language.’³³ Whether or not one feels comfortable invoking Marx, it seems to me that this legacy of the social is one well worth tracking... even today.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 125.

³⁰ See *ibid.*, 126.

³¹ ‘The history of political-economic abstractions is part of a much wider terrain of intellectual history. It is an intellectual history whose epochal specificity is marked by the role of real abstractions in framing the formal logic of discourses that ostensibly have little to do with political economy.’ *Ibid.*, 117.

³² *Ibid.*, 114.

³³ Sewell, *Logics*, 322.