

THE THEORETICAL FIELD OF ABSTRACT LABOR

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the epistemological foundations of abstract labor and its role in Marx's critique of classical political economy, drawing on Althusser's concept of the "theoretical field." It highlights how classical political economy's categories render certain social phenomena invisible, particularly the specific social form of capitalist labor. Heinrich's analysis redefines abstraction as a social practice, emphasizing the mediation between private and social dimensions of labor through market exchange. The article explores how exploitation, in its capitalist form, is mediated by the temporal and logical interplay between production and circulation. By situating abstract labor within the capitalist totality, it underscores its pivotal role in understanding the commodity form and the broader social nexus of capitalist modernity.

KEYWORDS

Abstract Labor; Theoretical Field; Louis Althusser; Marxist Epistemology; Commodity Form

Given the heterogeneity of such a large collection of essays that range across different themes, I will focus mainly on two issues, which are not necessarily the most important ones in the book but intersect more directly with some of the themes of interest to me or on which I have had the opportunity to work in the past. These include the concept of the "theoretical field" (and more generally epistemological issues, which appear in several sections of the book), which Heinrich takes from Althusser and develops more extensively in the fourth chapter of the book, and that of abstract labor, to which the sixth chapter is devoted. These themes also appear several times in the two prefaces to

the Italian edition of the book by Riccardo Bellofiore¹ and Vittorio Morfino,² to which I refer for a more systematic discussion of those themes.

1. THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE THEORETICAL FIELD

Chapter Four, *The Breaking of the Theoretical Field of Political Economy*, is where Althusser's influence is perhaps most visible in Heinrich's thought and where a straightforward epistemological problem is addressed. The problem concerns how the use of certain categories within a theoretical field is not to be understood in a purely restricted way, as if they simply concern a specific or marginal problem, but rather how these categories participate in the individuation of a theoretical field and what this field might render intelligible. There is no "metalanguage" that can differentiate general epistemological problems regarding how a theoretical field is constituted from specific and regional concerns that would only help us understand how it works. In the Althusserian epistemological discussion, there is no difference between the background and the detail.

The critique of Marx's political economy is not a critique of some specific issues but concerns the underlying epistemological assumptions: the general analytical categories. It is about Marx's break with empiricism and positivism, which occurs when Marx begins to become aware of the stakes of this discussion during the writing of *Capital*. The problem is not so much what political economy gets wrong but what it cannot *necessarily* see, given its epistemological assumptions.

According to Marx, it is not a matter of developing a critique of the categories of political economy as wrong or inadequate but of identifying, correctly as it were, a theoretical field where some objects are simply invisible. This is a fundamental epistemological problem according to Althusser: science always concerns a problem of visibility. Given the use of certain categories, in classical political economy, some objects cannot become intelligible. These are not errors but conceptual assumptions that can only lead to certain results and the analysis of certain epistemological objects. If classical political economy does not understand the link between value and money,³ for example, or if it is unable to understand the exchange between capital and labor-power according to a logic of equivalence, it is because it lacks certain theoretical

¹ Riccardo Bellofiore, *On some problems of Marxian theory, introduction* in Michael Heinrich, *La scienza del valore. La critica marxiana dell'economia politica tra rivoluzione scientifica e tradizione classica*, PGreco-Filrosso, Milano 2023, pp. 9-69.

² Vittorio Morfino, *Una nota su Heinrich e Althusser*, preface in Michael Heinrich, *La scienza del valore*, cit., pp. 71-86.

³ Michael Heinrich, *La scienza del valore*, cit., p. 296.

assumptions that can only lead it in this direction. Heinrich also notes this in Chapter Six on the monetary theory of value, where he says that the ultimate point of reference of political economy is always the individual,⁴ who, elevated into a generic human being, can only present himself in the marketplace as an individual commodity owner. If the premise is that of the individual commodity owner, the problem can only be the quantitative determination of this relation of exchange: classical political economy does not make a mistake here; it is simply unable, with its categories, to address the problem of the specific *social form* of commodity-producing labor, i.e., capitalist labor. In a sense, the use of its categories does not allow it to see the specificity of the capitalist social form: as it were, it conditions its points of view and not its objects of analysis.

Althusser claims this in *Reading Capital*, in a passage that undoubtedly influenced Heinrich:

What made the mistake of political economy possible does indeed affect the transformation of the object of its oversight. What political economy does not see is not a pre-existing object which it could have seen but did not see -- but an object which it produced itself in its operation of knowledge and which did not pre-exist it: precisely the production itself, which is identical with the object. What political economy does not see is what it does: its production of a new answer without a question, and simultaneously the production of a new latent question contained by default in this new answer.⁵

Althusser poses the problem of the relation between objects and science, and it is a point where Heinrich notices that Marx develops an epistemological reflection that—perhaps not fully consciously—parts ways with a positivistic approach to empirical sciences. The latter, instead, regard their objects as presupposed and extra-scientific givens that do not have to be explained from a theoretical point of view. Empirical sciences consider their objects as presupposed givens that do not have to be explained: sciences are thus merely neutral tools that must come as close as possible to a representation of objects that lie outside their own theoretical machinery, and which can be represented more or less faithfully depending on how good the scientific tools employed are. In this sense, the task of epistemology is to check the degree of fallibility of the theoretical tools that are used by measuring how carefully they successfully managed to represent real objects.

Here, we can perceive the distance between what Althusser calls ideology and science proper. Heinrich, however, does not seem to agree with the use of this famous Althusserian conceptual couple (“he too hastily links his conception [of ‘problematic’ and ‘theoretical field’] with a dichotomy between science and ideology, or between

⁴ *Idem*, p. 305.

⁵ Louis Althusser, Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, New Left Books - NLB, London 1975, p. 24.

science and non-science”⁶), which instead seems compatible with Heinrich’s general argument. Ideology, in Althusser, should not be opposed to science. It is not only an internal object of science but is almost a specific type of science, or at least of what commonsensically we understand as empirical sciences. Positivist empiricism does not address the problem of how objects of science are actually an internal product of scientific production itself and not an extra-theoretical fact. Science does not find ready-made objects outside of itself; rather, it produces them through certain formalizing practices and specific categories. Or rather, it makes these objects visible or intelligible by opening a new theoretical field: one that manages to ask new questions and succeeds in making different objects emerge in the field of the visible and the intelligible.

This introduces us to a fact peculiar to the very existence of science: it can only pose problems on the terrain and within the horizon of a definite theoretical structure, its problematic, which constitutes its absolute and definite theoretical structure, its problematic, which constitutes its condition of possibility, and hence the absolute determination *of the forms in which a problem must be posed*, at any given moment in the science. This opens the way to an understanding of the determination of the visible as visible, and conjointly, of the invisible as invisible, and of the organic link binding the invisible to the visible. Any object or problem situated on the terrain and within the horizon, i.e., in the definite structured field of the theoretical problematic of a given theoretical discipline, is visible.⁷

In this sense, we can divide scientific practices that are aware of their own process of production and thus regard their objects as stemming from their own formal procedure from those that instead foreclose their own procedure of production. The latter believe that in their dealing with objects supposedly already constituted in the field of reality, they can rise to a higher and more neutral level of science. They fail to realize that these objects, which they consider external to their scientific practice, are nothing more than a by-product of their own categories and presuppositions. It is in this sense that Althusser reduces empiricism to a form of ideology: because ideology merely entails a mechanism of repetition of its own presuppositions and mirrors itself in objects external to it. Thus, it does not produce any new knowledge but only eternally repeats already given presuppositions. Classical political economy, as an empirical science, structurally has limitations intrinsic to its theoretical assumptions that cannot be overcome except through the foundation of a new theoretical field and new objects. As Althusser says, if

the view I have put forward is correct, 'to criticize' Political Economy cannot mean to criticize or correct certain inaccuracies or points of detail in an existing discipline -- nor

⁶ Michael Heinrich, *La scienza del valore*, cit., p. 107.

⁷ Louis Althusser, Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, cit., p. 25.

even to fill in its gaps, its blanks, pursuing further an already largely initiated movement of exploration. 'To criticize Political Economy' means to confront it with a new problematic and a new object: i.e., to question the very object of Political Economy.⁸

If, therefore, we claim that historical materialism is a science and it stands as the opposite of the ideology of classical political economy, it is not because it is more infallible or has achieved a more definitive or absolute form of knowledge. Rather, it is because it is more conscious of the fact that its theoretical objects are created within its own scientific practice and are not to be presupposed or regarded as external to it. Scientific objects are consequential to the constitution of a new theoretical field, which asks new questions that would have been unthinkable within the previous theoretical field, such as classical political economy. According to Althusser, this brings historical materialism closer to two other theoretical practices.

On the one hand, something similar occurred with the emergence of psychoanalysis: it too attempted, amidst a thousand difficulties, to open up a new theoretical field with a new concept – the unconscious – which, from the perspective of psychology or psychiatry, is simply nowhere to be found. Freud's problem, not unlike Marx's, was to forcibly integrate this new object, which required a new theoretical field and new problems, within the positivist empirical sciences of the 19th century. On the other hand, the scientific dimension of historical materialism also brings it closer to mathematics, if we understand it – as Althusser did – as the scientific practice par excellence, precisely because it cuts off the empirical from the basis of sciences. As Maurice Loi says in his preface to the collection of writings of Albert Lautman:

mathematical entities are introduced by proper creative definitions that are not descriptions of an empirical datum [...]. In freeing mathematics from the task of describing an intuitive and given domain, a real revolution took place, whose scientific and philosophical consequences still await to be properly considered. Such a conception of mathematics, which brings it closer to other human creative activities, poses in new terms the problem of its relationship with reality and with objectivity and subjectivity. Modern empiricists willingly oppose science to subjectivism and voluntarism. Now, objectivity is never a given but an achievement whose extreme points are axiomatics and formal mathematics. It is a human task that requires work and effort, Herbrand and Lautman pointed out. To say that objectivity is not an empirical fact but an achievement and a task is tantamount to saying that its progress refers to a common root between the theoretical domain and the ethical one, and that *rational thought is the source of objectivity* and of what Husserl called the "highest of values"⁹

⁸ *Idem*, p. 158.

⁹ Maurice Loi, *Introduction* in Albert Lautman, *Essai sur l'unité des mathématiques et divers écrits*, Union Générale d'éditions, Paris 1977, pp. 8-9.

2. THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF ABSTRACT LABOR

There is a short quote from *Capital* that seems crucial to understanding the core of Heinrich's argument:

Political economy has in fact analyzed value and magnitude of value, although not at all exhaustively, and uncovered the content hidden in these forms. But it has never even posed the question of why this content takes that form.¹⁰

If *Capital* entailed an epistemological *coupure*, it was because it opened up a new theoretical field where there is an object that, for classical political economy, would not only make no sense but would, in fact, be invisible: that of the *form* of value. So, not what is the magnitude of value in the sphere of circulation or the amount of labor time extracted in production, but *why*. Why did it take that form?

The basic quandary of the capitalist mode of production seems to be the translation of a fundamental dissymmetry sitting at the core of the sphere of production into a logic of equivalence in the market. Or, to put it differently, how is it that the exploitation of the labor of a subordinate social class (a phenomenon that existed in pre-capitalist societies) has taken *that* specific form? How is it that the exploitation of the labor of a social class no longer has the form of explicit subordination (of status, caste, or census), but instead takes the form of the seemingly free selling of labor-power, which is then embodied in a commodity and then money?

Heinrich had the great merit of shifting the question of value from a problem of quantitative representation of a concrete entity (structurally irreducible to any form of calculation, whether as labor time or average technological content of production) to a *qualitative* problem: the reason for its social form. This had a dual merit. On the one hand, it prevented Marx from being reduced to a variation on the theme of Ricardian socialism, i.e., from reducing his theory of exploitation to a problem of misappropriation of a surplus of labor extracted in production, which could, in theory, be corrected by a fair wage and a more ethical division of labor. On the other, it avoided reducing the problem of value to a dynamic of abstraction from the concrete, i.e., that the movement of capitalist accumulation is merely a process of progressing from the concrete to the abstract, emptying out quality and concreteness.¹¹

¹⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital. Critique of Political Economy. Volume 1*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ & Oxford 2024, p. 56.

¹¹ This is the thesis, which otherwise has several reasons for interest, of Roberto Finelli in *Astrazione e dialettica dal Romanticismo al capitalismo (saggio su Marx)*, Bulzoni, Rome 1987 and in *Marxismo della "contraddizione" e marxismo dell'"astrazione"*, in Devi Sacchetto and Massimiliano Tomba (edited by), *La lunga accumulazione originaria*, Ombre corte, Verona 2008, pp. 74-88.

Heinrich recalls that Marx always believed commodities were “materializations of social labor.” Yet, because of his anti-empiricist methodological approach, Marx did not start from a given—such as the concrete labor or use value of commodities, which seem unquestionable facts of reality—to try to extract a common substance. Instead, he reversed the perspective, considering the immediate empirical given as *posited* (i.e., always already mediated) by a pre-existing social totality, which is none other than a capitalist totality. There is no point of view that can explain the historical genesis of capitalism by starting from an individual commodity or individual concrete labor, as many have attempted to do by narrowly reading the beginning of the first book of *Capital*. Every point of view can only ever be internal to the capitalist totality. Every analytical element considered must already be posited (or produced) by the totality of that social field.

The problem, then, is the relation between abstract and concrete—a relation, however, that cannot start from the evidence of the concrete and then derive an abstraction from it. Instead, it must presuppose a different kind of relationship, not plagued by an empirical epistemological frame. While at first, abstraction may seem to be the determination of labor with no particular quality—that is, generic labor, as Marx in a few passages almost seems to imply—Heinrich instead understands abstraction as part of an effective social practice: that is, a *real abstraction*. A kind of abstraction that fundamentally changes the term's meaning (in an Althusserian sense, we might say that in the theoretical field opened by historical materialism, “abstract” takes on a different meaning irreducible to the abstraction from a particular).

The equalization of private labors in exchange is not a simple property of individual private labor per se but is rather a determinate social relation vis-à-vis all other private labor. Only through this specifically social equalization can one speak of abstract labor.¹²

This specifically social abstraction takes place in a movement that—from the organization of production to the creation of commodities to the exchange on the market—makes *real*, in a processual way, what otherwise could only be an intellectual form of abstraction.

Another way—less philosophical and more faithful to Marx as a critic of capitalist modernity—is to substitute the relation between abstract and concrete with the relation between the private (concrete) and social (abstract) dimensions of labor. In fact, in the capitalist world, the general organization of production is not decided from the outset according to the specific needs of society but is left to be determined by the interactions of the market. This means that when labor is organized privately—when a capitalist privately buys the means of production and labor-power to initiate a process of

¹² Michael Heinrich, *La scienza del valore*, cit., p. 309 (my translation).

commodity production—they cannot know whether these commodities will meet a real social need, that is, whether they will be useful to anyone. It is only when commodities are sold in the market that their social value is definitively recognized through actual demand. We could even imagine a non-capitalist society where production begins only when a specific social need is already known. This is not the case with the capitalist mode of production, where the process of socialization occurs through a temporal delay between the moment of production's organization and the moment of the commodity's sale in the sphere of circulation.

Therefore, to understand the specifically capitalist dimension of workers' exploitation—that is, the process by which living labor is extracted from labor-power and transformed into abstract labor in the sphere of circulation when exchanged through money—we must use the future perfect tense: whether that extraction of living labor *will have become* abstract labor can only be known at the moment of the commodity's exchange in the market, not during production. At the point of production, the living labor extracted from labor-power is only *abstract labor in potential*;¹³ it is *not yet* abstract labor. This means that, logically, exploitation occurs *après-coup*, moving from the sphere of circulation back to the sphere of production.¹⁴ The use of the future perfect tense is almost paradoxical: the future occurs, so to speak, before the past, creating a clash between chronological and logical time. From a logical perspective, the temporality of circulation conditions something that, chronologically, has already occurred. Indeed, if a commodity is not sold in the market, the living labor extracted during production (which may have been as physically demanding as any other work) *will not have constituted* exploitation.

This, of course, brings interesting consequences regarding our understanding of exploitation. We must conclude from this conception of abstract labor that exploitation, understood in its specifically capitalist sense, can never be an immediate experience. It can only be mediated through a social totality in which production and circulation, private labor and socialization in the market, and concrete and abstract dimensions are conceptualized together. Although, from a chronological or experiential perspective, the stages of capitalist accumulation occur sequentially (and today, with the extension of value chains, often in geographically distant places), they should be considered simultaneous from the perspective of logical time. This simultaneity lies at the heart of the analytical interest in the category of abstract labor,

¹³ I refer here to Riccardo Bellofiore's arguments (among other places, in the section *Beyond the "Two Worlds," monetary ante-validation* in the introduction to Michael Heinrich, *La scienza del valore*, cit., pp. 48-50), and in particular to his interpretation of Rubin.

¹⁴ For a discussion of the concept of *après-coup* see Jacques Lacan, *Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty* in Id., *Écrits*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York- London 2006, pp. 161-175.

which might otherwise risk being reduced to a minor interpretive detail (is abstract labor simply qualitatively generic labor, or is it a social process encompassing the entirety of the capitalist totality?)

Abstract labor is indeed the cornerstone through which the capitalist totality separates the immediate perception of our roles within it from the logic of the social nexuses that connect us through commodities. Within this deceptively disguised or inverted social link (as in the concept of *Verrückte Formen*),¹⁵ we must continue to decipher the quandary of the commodity form.

¹⁵ For a discussion of the origin and development of this concept see Riccardo Bellofiore, Tommaso Redolfi Riva, "The *Neue Marx-Lektüre*: Putting the critique of political economy back into the critique of society," *Radical Philosophy* 189, Jan/Feb 2015.