

Hegel and the advent of modernity

A social ontology of abstraction

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Abstraction is a bitter chalice but modernity must drain it to the dregs and reeling in simulated inebriation, proclaim it the ambrosia of the gods.

Henri Lefebvre,

Introduction to Modernity

Bitter abstraction. In which the distance between cause and effect is developed with the aid of weaponry and mathematics to produce morbid symptoms in the economy, environment and the use of force.

John Barker,

Dirty Secrets 8 / Bitter Abstraction

In the third paragraph of his 1857 Introduction to the *Grundrisse*, 'On Method of Political Economy', Marx famously recalls the route 'historically followed by economics at the time of its origins': it started from the living whole of the state or of the population to ascend to 'a small number of determinant, abstract, general relations such as division of labour, money, value, etc.' While rejecting the analytical path embraced by seventeenth-century economists, Marx outlines his own method, which inversely begins with simple abstractions to finally attain the 'rich totality of many determinations and relations'. Such a concrete whole, which Marx defines in a manifest Hegelian fashion as 'the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse', is meant to appear 'in the process of thinking ... as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation and conception.'¹ But precisely because on a methodological level 'abstract determinations lead towards a reproduction of the concrete

by way of thought', and method makes concreteness appear as a result that merely belongs to thought (*Gedankenkonkretum*), illusions may arise. Indeed, Marx argues, 'Hegel fell into the illusion of conceiving the real as the product of thought concentrating itself, probing its own depths, and unfolding itself out of itself, by itself.' According to Marx, Hegel's illusion may have consisted in assuming the concept of the concrete as accountable for the concrete coming into being. '[T]his is characteristic of the philosophical consciousness', Marx observes, 'for which the conceptual world as such is thus the only reality, [and] the movement of the categories appears as the real act of production – which only, unfortunately, receives a jolt from the outside – whose product is the world.'² Yet, in fact, while focusing primarily on the dangers of Hegel's proverbial idealism, and warning against his perverted understanding of concreteness, Marx's stance misses the chance to engage with Hegel's own conception of abstraction and to ask, in Alfred Sohn-Rethel's words, whether there can be 'abstraction other than by thought' in Hegel's own philosophy?³

In the continuation of the same passage of the *Grundrisse*, Marx reflects on the very status of 'the simple abstract categories' that represent the starting point of his political economy. On the one hand, he observes that 'as a rule, the most general abstractions arise only in the midst of the richest possible concrete development, where one thing appears as common to many, to all'; on the other hand, he explicitly states that the abstraction of labour as such 'is not merely the mental product of a concrete totality of labours': such an abstract 'indifference towards

any specific kind of labour' corresponds to the very specific form of capitalist society. Thus, Marx claims that in modern times, and more specifically since the advent of capitalism, abstraction does not only pertain to the category of labour, rather it belongs to 'labour in reality'.⁴ Hence, he concludes that in bourgeois 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*.'⁵

Not surprisingly, Hegel, for whom abstraction is synonymous with 'the system of all-round interdependence' that sustains the totality of the social whole, and for whom abstraction 'becomes also a *determination* of the mutual relations between individuals' in capitalism, would have completely agreed with Marx on this point.⁶ Yet, Marx doesn't recognise Hegel as a precursor on the way to 'real abstraction', and the Marxist debate on the matter, with a few significant exceptions, seems to have overlooked the debt that Marx owes to Hegel regarding the notion of abstraction *qua* historically determined social form.⁷ Within this field, many valuable researches have been conducted to trace and explore the multiple conceptual influences of Hegel's *Logic* on Marx's *Capital*, such as, for example, the writings of Chris Arthur, which stress with particular emphasis the structural homologies existing between the two seminal works.⁸ Nevertheless, Hegel's own pivotal understanding of abstraction remains in the shadows, precisely because of the more relevant, radical and systematic use that Marx made of this notion. It is revealing that in delving into Marx's formulation of 'real abstraction', Sohn-Rethel's *Intellectual and Manual Labour* does not itself trace any comparison with Hegel's concept of abstraction; and Hegel is only recalled as 'the discoverer of dialectics',⁹ never as 'the discoverer of abstraction', which in fact he was.

However, this paper's aim is neither 'to do justice' to Hegel nor to argue for the presence of proto-Marxian elements of political economy in Hegel's works that would have tacitly inspired his conception of modern society. Its purpose is rather to revisit Hegel's multifaceted 'theory' of abstrac-

tion, and to do it genetically so as to suggest that the notion of abstraction plays a pivotal role in the development of Hegel's *Gesamtsystem* as well as in the very structuring of his social and political thought.¹⁰ Three main questions will frame the text that follows. First, what is abstraction in Hegel's terms and how does it operate in the distinct domains of his philosophy? Second, to what extent can abstraction be considered as a crucial cipher of Hegel's conception of social relations under modern capitalism? And, finally, what is the peculiar connection that Hegel establishes between the notion of abstraction and the advent of modernity?

To answer these questions, I will first provide an overview of the significant (though ambivalent) role played by the concept of abstraction in Hegel's early philosophy. Next, by looking more specifically at his Jena lectures and writings, I will distinguish the meaning and function of what I call Hegel's 'critique of theoretical abstraction' from his 'critique of social abstraction'. Third, by focusing on the former, I will illustrate logical abstraction's social relapses through the *Essay on Natural Law* (1802-03). As a fourth step, I will briefly consider three salient moments in the development of Hegel's theory of *Sittlichkeit* – the early *System of Ethical Life* (1802-03), the last *Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit* (1805-06) and *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (specifically, the section on 'Civil Society') – in order to expose how abstraction contributes essentially to the construction of social ties, becoming a *mode of social production*. Finally, I will argue that Hegel's 'practically true abstraction' should be understood as the core of his social ontology of modernity.

Who thinks concretely?

Heinrich Heine, a devoted pupil of Hegel, mentions him several times throughout his *Confessions* (1854). Among his memories, one is particularly telling with regard to the theme of this article: 'One beautiful starry-skied evening, we stood next to each other at a window, and I, a young man of about twenty-two who had just eaten well and had good coffee, enthused about the stars and called them the abode of the blessed. But the master grumbled to himself:



“The stars, hum! Hum! The stars are only a gleaming leprosy in the sky”.¹¹ In the addition to §341 of the *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel recalls this episode and somehow seeks to justify himself concerning his cynicism and his lack of enthusiasm for celestial bodies: ‘It has been rumoured round the town that I have compared the stars to a rash on an organism where the skin erupts in an countless mass of red spots: or to an ant-heap in which, too, there is Understanding and necessity. In fact, I do rate what is *concrete* higher than what is *abstract*, and an animality that develops into no more than a slime, higher than the starry host.’¹²

Despite Hegel’s candidly admitted preference for the concrete over the abstract, abstraction is not of mere secondary importance in his philosophy: on the one hand, ‘real concreteness’ includes abstraction as one of its necessary components; on the other hand, as we shall see, abstraction, so to speak, becomes concrete in modern society. Moreover, that a stubborn and acute upholder of the concept should express such a manifest inclination for concreteness

may appear somewhat surprising. In a short essay that speculates on Hegel’s famous reproach to Kant for having displayed in his antinomies too much ‘tenderness for the things of the world’,¹³ Remo Bodei provocatively raises the question of why the ‘starry heavens’ and the ‘moral law’ – so important to the philosopher of Königsberg – do not seem to interest Hegel, or perhaps even disappoint him.¹⁴ Bodei convincingly interprets Hegel’s lack of interest as the propensity to concentrate the efforts of reason on the sublunary world and its terrestrial matters, with respect to which the sky and the interiority of the moral commandment represent merely two lines of flight. To this extent, Hegel’s *critique* of abstraction can be considered as one of the primary means by which he seeks to channel philosophical reason into the world.¹⁵

Although Hegel never explicitly tackles the theme of abstraction, except in his 1807 pamphlet *Who thinks abstractly?*, the concept often recurs in his writings. In fact, under the notion of abstraction Hegel labels a wide range of theoretical con-

figurations and socio-historical phenomena: understanding is abstract, sensuous immediacy and intuition are abstract, labour in modern capitalism is abstract, as is 'right'. But also positivity, bad infinity, romantic irony, Fichte's theory of *Sollen*, the constitution of Germany, the Jacobin Terror, the German *Aufklärung*, Kant's morality, Jacobi's conception of faith, the empirical and formal sciences, can all be considered as *distinct* manifestations of abstraction. Indeed the concept of abstraction in Hegel's works is a *pollakôs legômenon*, it can be said in many ways and must be 'handled with care' because of its constitutive ambivalences. Before *Hegel properly becomes Hegel*, the term 'abstraction' already appears in his youthful writings. In a fragment of 1792-93, the so-called *Tubingen Fragment*, where he distinguishes between subjective and objective religion, Hegel characterises the first as 'alive, having an efficacy that while abiding within one's being, is actively directed outward', while stating that 'objective religion is *abstraction*'. He illustrates the first metaphorically as the 'living book of nature', in which each element lives and reproduces itself in harmony with the whole, and the second as 'the cabinet of the naturalist' in which insects have been killed, plants desiccated and animals embalmed. Here abstraction coincides with the intellectual ratiocination that reduces the totality of life to a dead composition of parts in opposition to the much-hoped-for organic unity of reason and sensibility that inspired Hegel's early philosophical ideals.¹⁶

In the *Preface* to the second edition of his essay on *The Positivity of Christian Religion*, written in Frankfurt in 1800, Hegel calls 'abstract' those universal concepts used by reflection (*Reflexion* employed here as a synonym for *Verstand*, or understanding) to define the presumed essence of human nature. In an entirely arbitrary way, 'these simple concepts' by virtue of their universality become 'necessary concepts and characteristics of humanity as a whole', while 'the variations in national or individual manners, customs and opinions become accidents, prejudices and errors.' Such empty abstractions that foster the delusion of having embraced 'the infinite multiplicity of the manifestations of human nature' are opposed to the Living for which all that the concept

treats as superfluous and contingent is 'the only thing which is natural and beautiful.'¹⁷ Here abstraction stands for the vacuity of formalism.

Drawing on Hegel's early writings, a first appearance of abstraction can be discerned in the disintegrative and oppositional relation of abstract understanding to the whole – one that is accountable for obstructing the reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) which the philosopher, working between Tübingen, Berne and Frankfurt (1788-1800), seeks to realise progressively through love, religion and in the immanence of life. However, from Jena (in 1801) onwards, Hegel distances himself from his previous Romantic denunciation of the ruinous consequences of abstraction to embrace a rigorous speculative criticism of abstract thinking as it is embodied in the philosophies of his contemporaries and predecessors.

Nonetheless, even in his mature works, Hegel never fully defines abstraction as such, nor does he explain unequivocally the significance of this polysemous notion, which appears in his writings in varying and sometimes even opposed senses. Etymologically, the abstract (*abs-tractum*) is the 'separate', the result of a reflective process that produces opposition and crystallises the terms of division. Hegel generally assigns abstraction a negative sense, but not always. For example, in §3 of the *Encyclopaedia* where 'the unintelligibility' of philosophy is connected to a general lack of training in the exercise of abstract thought – 'the inability (which in-itself is just a lack of practice) to *thinking abstractly*' – Hegel gives the faculty of *abstraktes Denken* a positive connotation.¹⁸ Abstraction, which has the merit of elaborating pure thoughts unmixed with representations, is counterposed here to the phagocytising immediacy of intuition, and the philosopher acknowledges the superiority of the abstract thought that rises above sensory contingency and overcomes the accidental nature of the opinions of common sense.

In order to better grasp what abstraction is and, foremost, *what it does* in Hegel's philosophy, one needs to look at its antonym, concreteness. As has been noted, Hegel was the first to unsettle the historical divide between the abstract and the concrete traditionally identified with the speculative and the empirical, respectively.¹⁹ His *Science of Logic*, which

privileges the ascendant method – or the dialectical method – as a movement from the abstract to the concrete, considers the self-development of the Absolute Idea as the highest degree of concreteness. (This is why Marx in the *Grundrisse* actually attributes to Hegel the fallacious assumption that concreteness simply stems from thought, as noticed earlier.) For Hegel, indeed, the concrete occurs only in the form of totality and, in regard to this, he is careful to distinguish the concrete from the *immediate*: immediate intuition is by no means concrete; conversely, concrete knowledge is that which can acknowledge and articulate within itself the totality of the particulars, not in the form of a casual mirroring of the existent but in a *mediated*, speculative fashion.²⁰ Drawing on the etymology of *cum-crescere* (literally growing / expanding-together) which stands for a synthetic expansion of multiple determinations, Hegel argues that for the universal to be concrete it must shape an adequate relation between the form of totality and determinate matters. The universal ‘taken formally, and put *side by side* with the particular’, like Kant’s universal law of moral reason emptied of all content, only reproduces the much-reviled frame of *bad infinity*, whereas the concrete universal consists of the speculative synthesis of speculation with worldly experience.²¹ This presupposed result – the Absolute as a systemic ‘organisation of propositions and intuitions’ – which is ‘the lost concept’ that all Hegelian philosophy strives to restore, would be the paradigmatic embodiment of Hegel’s concrete.²² Thus the intimate connection between formalism, universality and abstraction can be deduced, *via negativa*, from Hegel’s understanding of the concrete as opposed to the formal universal. At this point, the questions raised a few lines earlier – what is abstraction and, above all, what does abstraction do in Hegel’s philosophy? – can be asked again and eventually answered.

The unbearable lightness of abstraction

‘The abstract is finite; the concrete is truth’, states Hegel in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, meaningfully detaching finitude and abstraction from truth.²³ In fact, such an assumption

doesn’t do justice to finitude nor to abstraction, as both concepts, in Hegel’s view, actually maintain a strong truth-value. Upon a closer examination of his texts, one could remark that for Hegel not all that is finite is abstract and not all that is abstract is false. As Herbert Marcuse points out in *Reason and Revolution* (1941), ‘for Hegel all fixed forms reveal themselves to be mere abstractions’,²⁴ i.e. not the finite forms per se, but the finite forms fixed as static ones or the unilateral self-positing of finitude. Along the same lines, Eric Weil argues: ‘In Hegelian terms, that a notion is abstract does not in any way mean that it is false or that it can or must be abandoned. On the contrary, it indicates that it is indispensable – thought incomplete – in every respect. It is an essential element figuring in the comprehensive account of the development of the concept, and this account will have to, as Hegel says, *aufheben* the abstract quality, which means to abrogate it, but only in the sense of abrogating what is abstract in it in order to preserve it by sublimation and thereby give it its positive function in the organised totality of Reason.’²⁵ At a theoretical scale, abstraction consists, according to Hegel, in the surreptitious absolutisation of the particular that claims to raise itself to the level of the universal and instead plunges into the formalism of an empty concept. Once again the particular is not abstract because of its partiality, but only because of its ungrounded and accidental pretension to be universal.

The main consequence that arises from this unilateral self-positing of a particular determinacy is the necessity of its *reversal*. Theoretical abstraction, then, *doesn’t hold up* and generates unstable settings generally doomed to be reversed. On the contrary, as we shall see, practical abstraction, which corresponds to abstraction originating in bourgeois society, gradually becomes, in the framework of Hegel’s political theory, a crucial concrete instrument for reinforcing the social bond.

Looking at the evolution of Hegel’s philosophy in Jena, and more specifically at the genealogy of the consecutive reconfigurations of his system drafts, one can trace a fundamental divide between two distinct schemes of functioning that belong to theoretical abstraction, on the one hand, and to social ab-

straction, on the other hand. Genealogical retrospection sheds light on the asymmetrical solutions that Hegel provides in order to overcome theoretical abstraction (or abstraction in thought) through the invention of the standpoint of consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and to accommodate social abstraction (or abstraction in the socio-economic sphere) within the framework of his newly-emergent philosophy of Spirit (*Geist*). Following Hegel's critique of abstraction along these two separate paths, it is possible to distinguish his *critique of understanding* from his *critique of bourgeois society*. In this regard the Jena period is marked by a peculiar parabola whereby the two trajectories of Hegel's critique of abstraction have very different fates. Although both theoretical and social abstraction exhibit a peculiar *isomorphism* in relation to the abstracting mechanisms lying at their core – abstraction in both cases is premised on division, formalisation and universalisation – my claim is that an essential demarcation occurs between the two spheres, and that this demarcation appears to be irrefutable when one investigates the 'final destinations' reached by the two types of abstraction.

While for Marx theoretical abstraction represents a fruitful methodological option, for Hegel it constitutes a speculative obstacle to overcome; and, indeed, Hegel's effort to pursue this goal will induce an almost Copernican revolution in his early design of the *Gesamtsystem*. However, although from Hegel's early perspective, social abstraction represents an intrinsic threat to the unity of the ethical whole which he tries to secure and preserve, the later acknowledgement of the spiritual superiority of modernity over the simple political harmony of the Ancients allows Hegel to progressively make theoretical room for the constructive capacity of the abstract. As such, it becomes a vital ingredient for the consolidation of modern social relations. Finally, while the ontological character of the logic – or the intimate connection that the *Logic* establishes between thought and reality whereby the former constitutes the rational structure of the latter – allows Hegel to conceive of thought in terms of concreteness (the *Absolute idea* being the highest peak of concreteness), the peculiar nature of modern bour-

geois society obliges him to give an account of the concrete power of social abstractions.

On the theoretical plane, the scope of the critique of abstraction corresponds to Hegel's challenge to the philosophies of reflection (*Reflexionsphilosophien*) that emerged through the Kantian turn. Despite their declared speculative ambitions, these philosophies (Kant's philosophy as well as those of his idealist successors like Fichte, Schelling and, to a different extent, Reinhold, Bardili, Schulze and Jacobi) eventually end up – some more crassly than others – grounding knowledge on the limited principle of finite understanding and deserting the philosophical task *par excellence*, namely the achievement of the *absolute*, i.e. of *truth* that only exists in the shape of the *whole*, according to Hegel's famous statement from the Preface to the *Phenomenology*.²⁶ By condemning themselves to the horizon of finitude, the *Reflexionsphilosophien* manifest in philosophy that spirit of division (*Entzweiung*) that Hegel thought characteristic of modernity. Confronting himself with the panorama of contemporary German philosophy, he complains of what he would later (in the 1812 preface to the first edition of the *Science of Logic*) call the dishonourable spectacle of 'a cultivated people without metaphysics – like a temple richly ornamented in other respects but without a holy of holies.'²⁷ The philosophies of reflection constitute the sophisticated outcomes of *reflective understanding*, which 'insofar as it poses opposites' remains an 'abstract and therefore separating understanding, persisting in its separations.'²⁸ Therefore, according to Hegel, they are responsible for the reinforcement of metaphysical divisions, inasmuch as they work towards the reification of the finite at the expense of absolute.

Distancing his speculative endeavour from the modest and contradictory achievements attained by the *Reflexionsphilosophien*, Hegel sets his philosophy the task of overcoming the limits of finitude without getting caught in the vicious circle of *bad infinity* – an infinity thought of as opposed to, and isolated from, finitude – and accordingly conceives of the infinite as resulting from the very infinitisation of the finite. His critique of abstraction, in other words, consists in the rigorous effort conducted by reason to

reconcile the abstract hypostases that reflective understanding can but fix apart. On the logical level, the elaboration of a dialectical notion of *negation* – namely the transition from *Vernichtung* (annihilation) to *Aufhebung* (sublation) – helps Hegel supersede the impasses reached by the abstract ratiocination of understanding for which not only does each position stand for an opposition, but also each opposition simply precipitates in the elimination of one of the opposites, i.e. in the crystallisation of a finite determinacy against the other, and hence in abstraction. *Aufhebung*, in Weil's words, is what allows Hegel to fight abstraction by 'abrogating what is abstract in it in order to preserve it ... and thereby give it its positive function in the organised totality of Reason.'²⁹

However, in spite of Hegel's ruthless crusade against intellectual abstraction from his early writings onwards, the first variable sketches of his Jena speculative system – consisting of three parts: 1. *Logic and Metaphysics* followed by 2. *Philosophy of Nature* and 3. *Philosophy of Spirit*³⁰ – shows a significant remnant of abstract reasoning to be located precisely in the original division of *Logic and Metaphysics*. From Hegel's viewpoint, the complementarity of the two components of the entry-level of his *System of Science* results from the different functions respectively assigned to *Logic* and *Metaphysics*. Whilst the task of the first consists in displaying the successive unfolding of the categories of finite understanding in order to clear the way for the exposition of metaphysical principles, the task of the second consists in exposing its cognition (*Erkennen*) as separate and *abstract* from the logical path of understanding. However, the bipartition of *Logic* and *Metaphysics* perpetuates the exclusionary scheme of abstract thinking, by excluding the *Logic* (*qua* finite knowledge) from the perimeter of speculation (or *Metaphysics qua* infinite knowledge).³¹ Indeed the bipartition of the first part of the system into *Logic* and *Metaphysics* that Hegel will abandon in his later *Logic* – where 'the metaphysical element falls completely within' – but still maintains in the system projects elaborated between 1801 and 1806, testifies to the difficulties that the philosopher encountered in dissipating the residual presence of abstraction

which haunted his early *Gesamtsystem*. As the victim of a sort of philosophical retaliation, Hegel ends up stumbling on the *bad infinity* that his own speculative system produced by grounding infinite *Metaphysics* on the elimination of finite *Logic*.

At this stage, the problem of theoretical abstraction that inhabits Hegel's own philosophy will be truly solved and transcended only in the new emerging framework inaugurated by the *Phenomenology of Spirit* through the adoption of the standpoint of consciousness as the new organisational principle of the relationship between the finite and the absolute. It is in this sense that the *Phenomenology* signals the accomplishment of Hegel's critique of theoretical abstraction in at least two meaningful ways: first, by resetting the problem of the access to the Absolute – earlier entrusted to the *Logic of understanding* – and second, by re-determining the status, the forms and the scope of finitude inside speculation: no authentic speculative philosophy that aims at achieving the goal of the Absolute can disregard (or *abstract from*) the vital presence of the finite in it.³²

To come full circle: the critique of abstraction, as critique of the *bad infinity* generated by abstract understanding, finally attains a vigorous requalification of the finite as the inescapable premise for the infinitisation of thought. Conversely, as we will see in the next sections, on the historical plane, abstraction survives, by converting Hegel's initial critique into a gradual acknowledgement of modern abstraction's social potentiality and unavoidability.

Abstract Impostures

Among the many theoretical configurations of abstraction, the one exposed in Hegel's *Essay on Natural Law* (1802) provides a good example of the practical consequences of abstract thinking. Here abstraction appears as the result of an incongruous mediation between intellectual form and empirical matter – a mixture of 'absolute form with conditioned matter', whereby 'the absoluteness of the form is *im-perceptibly* smuggled into the unreal and conditioned character of the content.'³³ The main danger that occurs when an abstract universal concept proves to be incapable of mediating content – and properly ar-

articulating its relationship with the surrounding determinacies – is that it ends up gathering unmediated content that surreptitiously strives for universalisation. The outcome of this risky mismatch of form and content is the emergence of a universal imbued with one-sided obstinate particularity; hence, an illegitimate universal, an ‘impostor’. It is remarkable that already in this early text Hegel does not describe abstraction according to classical parameters for which abstraction stands for conceptuality, and concreteness stands for sensitivity. At the same time, abstraction does not correspond either to the neutral intellectual mechanism of generalisation that arises from multiplicity so as to reach a formal unity through an abstract collection of particulars. Instead, abstraction has to do with the nexus between universality and particularity, and, more precisely, with the universalisation of particularity. But it specifically designates the accidental and ungrounded process of absolutisation of the particular into the universal. Metaphorically speaking, we can call abstraction a peculiar intellectual move triggered by an impulse of ‘megalomania’ on the side of determinacy, which strives to affirm its absolute claim to be universal.

The *Essay on Natural Law* investigates the material implications of such an intellectual megalomania. Hegel’s declared aim here is to redefine – as is suggested by the title of the essay – Natural Law’s ‘Place in Moral Philosophy, and its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Law’. To this end he undertakes to demonstrate, on the one hand, the insufficiency of the formalist approach, and on the other, the limits of the empiricist tradition. While empirical science groups determinations in an accidental unity that does not correspond to organic totality, formalism, Hegel remarks, entrenches itself behind an empty universality, a universality devoid of contents, because its abstractness makes it unable to properly subsume and mediate the empirical. This is why as a pure and empty universal detached from and opposed to the empirical, Kant’s moral law can only incarnate the ‘non-substantial (*wesenlose*) abstraction of the one’.³⁴

Hegel’s critique of Kant’s ‘deposit example’ is well known. How can a ‘proper’ moral maxim be

distinguished from a non-moral one? Kant believes that the maxim ‘I shall keep on a deposit entrusted to me whenever the opportunity presents’ provides a good case for testing the criteria that would allow a maxim to be recognised as moral. Moral maxims are those that can be universalised, and actually not all maxims can become universal ones. According to Kant for example, the maxim of the deposit results in immorality because if generalised, Kant argues, it would come into conflict with the *concept* of deposit itself, thereby destroying the very possibility that deposit exists. To Kant’s argument, Hegel objects that if no deposit exists any longer there would indeed be no contradiction. In fact, non-property simply as such does not contradict itself. Or, Hegel suggests, in order to prove the inconsistency / immorality of a maxim of this kind, one would have to admit that a particular content like property has taken on, contingently, a necessary and universal legitimacy such as to make its negation contradictory. The fact that ‘property, *if property is*, must be property’ constitutes the rigorous yet formal outcome of the legislating faculty of practical reason, but ‘the interest at stake is precisely to prove that there must be property.’³⁵



Hegel here addresses a double reproach to Kant: first, Kant has applied the mechanism of formal contradiction to a historical fact (the institution of property) whose negation cannot be contradictory in itself, in so doing projecting a contradiction where there is no ground for contradiction; and second, Kant has grounded the entire edifice of his morality on weak and inadequate foundations. Self-contradiction as a matter of fact is not enough, since it does not apply to empirical contents, hence the self-consistency of a maxim doesn't guarantee for its morality. A formal criterion cannot guarantee for moral validity concerning empirical matters, and in this sense the principle of non-contradiction can only be the ground of *abstract* morality which, in turn, precisely because of its abstract nature turns out to be immoral. Thus Hegel observes that when the moral law is pure, it is tautological, whereas when it has heteronomous contents, it is *false*, as it is imbued with a set of contingent background assumptions (such as, for example, the absolute value of property). At this point, where a contingent element imposes itself as an absolute content within an empty universal, the danger of formalism does not reside in its emptiness, but, rather, in the a-critical subsuming of particular determinacies that have not been adequately mediated in the form of a universal. Abstract forms, in other words, let themselves be filled with anything, and consequently end up being not too empty, but actually *too full*. This is why abstraction, which is constitutive of any formalist approach, becomes in Hegel's view accountable both for being a theoretical defect that falsifies knowledge and for having significant socio-cultural relapses.

Create two, three, many abstractions, or, the cunning of bourgeois society

In order to illustrate what I shall describe as Hegel's 'social ontology of abstraction', I will first consider three salient moments in the development of his theory of ethical life: the *System of Ethical Life* (1802-03), the last *Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit* (1805-06) and the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1821). The trajectory of Hegel's social theory from the early *System der Sittlichkeit* to the

Berlin's *Grundlinien* reveals the occurrence of structural changes that concern primarily the status of so-called 'civil society', a concept that the young Hegel borrows from the Scottish Enlightenment and formally introduces only in 1817.³⁶ My suggestion is that we need to interpret this remarkable trajectory, which runs parallel to Hegel's redesigning of his speculative system, but follows a quite different rhythm, as a process of progressive *transvaluation* of social abstraction: from being a disruptive force susceptible to being contained and eliminated, abstraction, in Hegel's practical philosophy, ends up being upgraded to the rank of an inescapable ingredient in the formation of the ethical world.

The *System of Ethical Life* can be seen as the ground-zero of such a trajectory, the initial stage in which Hegel still subordinates the new instances that emerged with modernity and modern capitalism to the search for an organic synthesis with the structure of ancient ethical life. Drawing on Aristotle and still under the influence of Schelling's philosophy, Hegel's notion of ethical totality in the *System* implies an essentially negative conception of individuality, which, because of its tendency to abstract itself from and affirm itself against the ethical community, is accused of contributing to the disintegration of the social bond and must be overcome. The system testifies to Hegel's effort to work out a theoretical paradigm capable of accounting for the conditions of ruptured harmony that characterise modern bourgeois society, and at the same time capable of reconciling them. The result is a spurious anachronistic ensemble where the ferment and the antagonisms of the capitalist world are conveyed into a social arrangement largely patterned after premodern-precapitalist schemes. Hegel's approach to social abstraction as that which threatens to cause the modern ethical fabric to crumble, consists here in a resolute attempt to repress and limit the expansion of the economic sphere, which Hegel still understands only as a bubble of unlimited contingency to be domesticated and eventually circumscribed to a particular social group: the so-called 'class [*Stand*] of honesty' whose purpose 'lies in work for needs, in possessions, gain and property.'³⁷

The lectures on the *Philosophy of Spirit* (in par-

ticular, the ones of 1805-06) distance themselves from the setting of the *System of Ethical Life* insofar as they abandon the conceptual constellation that Hegel previously borrowed from Schelling and substitute the immobile ethical substance with the new dynamic framework of 'Actual spirit'. In the *Geistesphilosophie*, in which the structure of Spirit becomes the ground on which individual consciousness manifests and realises itself, Hegel ceases to praise the unconditional superiority of the Greek world and to confine the status of the individual to 'the sense of his inner nullity'. Finally, he fully acknowledges the higher principles and prerogatives of modernity over the 'beautiful public life' of the Ancients, the 'immediate unity of the universal and the individual, [the polis as] a work of art wherein no part separates itself from the whole.'³⁸ The shift to the philosophy of Spirit represents the very condition of possibility for Hegel's *transvaluation of the abstract*, reaching the radical awareness that, to quote Henri Lefebvre, '[m]odernity is doomed to explore and to live through abstraction.'³⁹ Indeed, Spirit incarnates a subjective instance of mediation that allows abstraction to disseminate itself and become productive within it. In turn, the new spiritual texture of ethical life allows Hegel to recognise the social surplus value of abstraction. In the new spiritual framework set up in the 1805-06 lectures, the building of society takes shape differently, freeing ethical life from the incoherence of the earlier experiments. Since social abstraction is established as *the indelible mark of modernity*, the abstract forms of the economic and the juridical spheres now thoroughly pervade all strata of society.

On a closer and more accurate look, we can gauge to what extent the new social sphere delineated by Hegel ('Actual Spirit') appears totally permeated by abstract and impersonal infrastructures, such as the system of needs, the labour process, the market as well as abstract rights and civil and penal laws. Starting from the very basis of the economic sphere (the web of needs), abstraction triggers a domino effect that actually constrains the agents in a societal network and that creates socialisation by means of atomisation, separating individuals from one another and inserting between their labour and the sat-

isfaction of their needs the long chain of produced and exchanged goods:

In the element of being as such, the existence and range of natural needs is a multitude of needs. The things serving to satisfy those needs are worked up [*verarbeitet*] But in the element of universality, [this processing (*Verarbeiten*) of things] is such that it becomes an abstract labour. The needs are many. The incorporation of their multiplicity in the I, i.e., labour, is an abstraction of universal models [*Bilder*] The I, which is for-itself, is abstract I; but it does labour, hence its labour is abstract as well. ... Since work is performed only [to satisfy] the need as abstract being-for-itself, the working becomes abstract as well. But the more abstract [his labour] becomes, the more he himself is mere abstract activity.⁴⁰

Hegel's remarkable merit consists not only in observing the proliferation of abstractions, but, first and foremost, in grasping how in modern capitalism such proliferation of parcelled needs, mechanised labour and multiple goods turns into a universally socialised totality, or, in other words, how abstraction generates concreteness:

Among these diverse, abstract, processed needs, a certain movement must now take place, *whereby they once again become concrete need[s]*, i.e., become the needs of an individual, who in turn becomes a subject comprising many needs. The judgment which analysed them, placed them against itself as determinate abstractions. Their universality to which this judgment rises is [that of] the equality of these needs, or value. In this they are the same. This value itself, as a thing, is money. The *return to concretion*, to possession, is exchange.⁴¹

Abstract labour derived from the social division of labour lays the groundwork for the emergence of property and contract, the advent of crime and punishment and the enactment of coercive laws. (These are the progressive steps of the section on 'Actual Spirit' that provides a prelude to the last and third section of the lectures devoted to the 'Constitution' of the State.⁴²) Thus the market and the law create an impersonal dominion that makes everyone horizontally dependent on everyone else and vertically dependent on the universality of the social bond. To cite Marx's statement in the *Grundrisse*, one can

say that ‘individuals are now ruled by *abstractions*, whereas earlier they depended on one another.’⁴³

In the sphere of *law*, where possession becomes property, Hegel remarks that ‘the highest abstraction of labour pervades that many more individual modes and thereby takes on an ever-widening scope’. This goes hand in hand with the increasing ‘contrast [between] great wealth and great poverty ...: the poverty for which it becomes impossible to do anything; [the] wealth [which], like any mass, makes itself into a force’. However, no structural solution can be provided to this phenomenon, only contingent remedies, insofar as the *cunning of government* precisely consists in ‘indulging the self-interest of others [*laissez-faire*], ‘freeing individual selfishness ... and managing it so that individual profit reverts [to government]’.⁴⁴ Yet, not even the *constitution* of the State, which incarnates the purpose and consummation of the ethical life of the people, can oppose the domination of the abstract, since, for Hegel, a state-run economy constitutes ‘a pre-modern institution, incompatible with the modern principle of individual freedom’.⁴⁵ Instead, the reproduction of the body politic is premised on the State’s capacity to balance ‘state power over life and freedom to live’, or in other words private interest and public ethos. Thus, the State finally culminates in the ‘*abstract system* of individual subsistence’ that has ‘many internal parts which [are complete in themselves and] and develop in their abstractness contributing to the totality’.⁴⁶

Since economic, juridical and political abstractions convert themselves into aggregating tools that account for the preservation and expansion of the *Sittlichkeit*, we can properly speak of a ‘social ontology of abstraction’ that from the Jena lectures onwards sustains Hegel’s conception of ethical life, i.e. Hegel’s political theory *tout court*. Is there a further horizon beyond politics to which the issue of abstraction could be deferred? Hegel recognises the history of the Spirit (in its artistic, religious and speculative dimensions) as the overarching framework of his theory of ethical life. Yet, immediate history (Hegel’s present) does not foresee any consistent response to the proliferation of abstraction, which as an enduring feature of capitalist modernity is merely consigned to the future advancement of the Spirit

without being sublated or reconciled. Historical reconciliation, in other terms, must accept and comprehend abstraction as the non-transcendable *medium* of the modern age, as its ineliminable *constructive mediation*. Along with the modern emergence of ‘a higher level of abstraction, a greater [degree of] contrast and cultivation’, Hegel thus calls for ‘a *deeper spirit*’ equipped to come to grips with the necessity of that abstraction.⁴⁷

The *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1821), almost two decades later, present us with an effective *mise en scène* of the *cunning of social abstraction*, by replacing the often obscure intricacies of Hegel’s Jena lectures with a well-ordered systematic shape. Here we finally encounter Hegel’s concept of civil society explicitly portrayed as the realm of the market economy and modern law and distinguished from both the private sphere of the family and from the State (although in Hegel’s view civil society determines the political form of the modern state).⁴⁸ In Hegel’s words, civil society designates ‘a system of all-round interdependence, so that the subsistence and welfare of the individual and his rightful existence are *interwoven* with, and grounded on, the subsistence, welfare and rights of all, and have actuality and security only in this context’.⁴⁹ Such an *interweaving* is premised on principles of equivalence and indifference that represent the quintessential matrix of abstraction in modern capitalism. Because of the power of abstract indifference, the more the individuals ‘make themselves links in the chain of this [social] *continuum* [*Zusammenhang*]’, the more they attain their fulfillment; thanks to the value of abstract equivalence, the more abstract the right is, the more it is universal, since its abstract formalism precisely amounts to its universal capacity to guarantee the conditions for individual freedom to be realised.⁵⁰

The domain of ‘Civil Society’ in the *Philosophy of Right* only partially coincides with the domain of ‘Actual Spirit’ in the Jena lectures, although many significant common threads (such as the system of needs, the division of labour, the administration of justice, among others) can be easily detected across the two texts. Interestingly, the term ‘abstraction’ and the attribute ‘abstract’ appear less frequently

in the *Grundlinien* than in the lectures, and yet at § 192 Hegel formulates a concise definition of abstraction's *modus operandi* that epitomises its most meaningful characteristics: 'abstraction which becomes a quality of both needs and means also becomes a determination of the mutual relations [*Beziehung*] between individuals. This universality ... is the moment which makes isolated and abstract needs, means, and modes of satisfaction into concrete, i.e. social ones.'⁵¹ In these few lines, Hegel, on the one hand, acknowledges the determining function of abstraction in respect to the construction of social ties among individuals and, on the other hand, conceives of social concreteness as a direct outcome of the proliferation of social abstraction. Abstraction gets here a further upgrade and becomes a *mode of social production* that determines the very building of civil society as well as the shaping of the modern state. In fact, in spite of its all-encompassing normative function, the State doesn't eliminate abstraction but rather results from it, being the most suitable institutional configuration to contain the dissemination of abstract forms and relations. Marx significantly grasped this point in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* where he acknowledges 'the abstraction of the political State as such' which 'belongs only to modern times, because the abstraction of private life belongs only to modern times.'⁵² Therefore, the transvaluation of social abstraction finds in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* its full accomplishment.

Living abstractly in concrete capitalism

So far we have observed how, in the course of the evolution of Hegel's political theory, social abstraction becomes a founding moment of modern ethical life. As a consequence, we can see a structural enhancement of the economic inside the body politic that precisely occurs thanks to economy's characteristic traits of abstraction (and not in spite of them). The resulting ethical world, portrayed in the Jena lectures and more organically in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, is a whole pervaded by abstraction throughout. Thus, in the Jena *Philosophy of Spirit* abstraction clearly spreads to all the levels of social formation: labour, exchange, law, administra-

tion of justice and state. Similarly, in the *Grundlinien*, civil society is produced and reproduced through the abstraction of needs and labour, whereas the foundations of the modern state are built on the abstractions of the law and of the economic sphere. Instead of constituting a factor of instability – as in the case of theoretical abstraction with respect to the logical grounding of Hegel's speculative system – abstraction in the historical world turns into a crucial tool for the production of social bonds. Moreover, abstraction does not simply represent a mere ingredient or component of civil society; rather, it operates as a dynamic factor that accounts through its own intensification and expansion for the actual construction of the social whole.

In examining Hegel's notion of abstraction and comparing it to Marx's – 'the most original element of Marx's social theory' – Roberto Finelli argues that, in the final instance, Hegel thought of social abstraction in a merely intellectualistic fashion, projecting onto his civil society the same logical scheme of intellectual abstraction.⁵³ Finelli claims, in fact, that the problem of 'how modern subjects, conceived as free and independent from each other, can join in sociality and at the same time maintain their autonomy' could be to some extent assimilated to the intellectualist problem of determining how many ones can generate the One, or, in other words, how to regain unity against division. Finally, Hegel's critique of abstraction still belongs to a 'predominantly humanistic horizon' that attempts to restore the lost immediate cohesion alienated from the social world. Only the late Marx, according to Finelli, actually managed through his labour theory of value to accomplish the process that Hegel could not bring to completion; namely, transforming logical abstraction into an abstraction that is 'true in practice' and behaves as the 'highest factor of reality and universalisation' in modern society.⁵⁴

My claim is that actually Hegel already fulfilled this task (although manifestly Hegel is no Marx and *has no Capital*, i.e. he doesn't elaborate a critique of political economy).⁵⁵ I would argue, in this light, that Finelli's analysis hits the mark in attesting to a certain structural homology between the terrain of Hegel's theoretical and social abstraction. At the

same time, however, Finelli ends up reducing social abstraction to an analytical function of understanding, precisely because he overlooks the most specific features that belong to abstraction in the social world and make it *really existing* in modern society. On the one hand, Finelli reasonably recognises that Hegel's social abstraction is real inasmuch as it concerns real praxis and resides in things rather than in thoughts, as he puts it. On the other hand, he emphasises that 'the quality of such abstraction ... remains intrinsically logico-analytical', where the 'analytical' refers to 'a function that remains a tool at man's disposal, that institutes an order which, though impersonal and alienating, is still at the measure of man'.⁵⁶ From this perspective, social abstraction incarnates an impersonal device of socialisation that nevertheless appears to be ruled by an intellectualist subject-predicate structure 'at the measure of man'. Social abstraction – like logical abstraction that reverses itself and results in the restoration of the concrete universal (the Absolute Idea) – is meant to revert to a cohesive social whole where unification is apparently gained through the removal of all determinacies. In both cases, for Finelli, the status of differences and determinacies would be inconsistent, being simply a 'moment' or the predicate of a subject it could be reabsorbed by, and, hence, merely 'intellectualistic'.

However, as noted by Peter Osborne, in Hegel 'this kind of practically "bad" abstraction – i.e. social abstraction as domination – has a different logical form to the "one-sided" bad abstractions of the understanding.'⁵⁷ Indeed, the most defining feature of social abstraction is precisely its *non-reversibility*. Unlike logical abstraction, which is doomed to be superseded by Hegel's re-foundation of a new speculative approach to the finite-infinite relation (through the *Phenomenology of Spirit*), social abstraction – modern capitalism's abstraction – *endures and remains*. As has been seen, through the detailed illustration above of Hegel's interweaving of atomisation and socialisation in civil society and his making the latter dependent on the former, social abstraction cannot be contained nor repaired: a long future of intense proliferation awaits abstraction in capitalist societies. Hegel makes do with this insight – the irre-

versible presence of social abstraction in the course of modern history – and does not engage in any criticism of modernity aimed at restoring the harmony of the social bond. Individual *alienation* that stems from the mechanisms of abstract socialisation underlying the economic, the juridical as well as the political spheres does not represent in Hegel's view a loss to recover. On the contrary, already in the Jena lectures, Hegel remarks that 'this alienation [i.e. the alienation of individuals' self-dependence into the magma of abstract sociality] is an acquiring (*Erwerben*)', inasmuch as it constitutes a peculiar form of *Bildung*, a deprivation that nevertheless guarantees a gain, which is precisely the surplus value of universal socialisation. Yet, universal socialisation does not correspond to universal cohesion, and for Hegel the *citoyen* remains an antagonist for the *bourgeois*, although both of them must be incarnated in the individual *Bürger* of *Bürgerliche Gesellschaft*.⁵⁸

Accordingly, it seems that Hegel's notion of social abstraction operates in a way that cannot be simply assimilated, *pace* Finelli, to the proceeding of intellectual abstraction. The difference is primarily functional: intellectual abstractions are by definition susceptible to being reversed, since they prove through their one-sided partiality to be inconsistent and unable set up a solid theoretical order. On the contrary, social abstraction gives both firmness and concreteness to the asymmetrical and atomised relations around which it aggregates social objectivity. Further, if, as Moishe Postone argues with regard to Marx, 'what fundamentally characterises capitalism is a historically specific abstract form of social mediation – a form of social relations that is unique inasmuch as it is mediated by labour', one could argue that Hegel had already developed an identical insight, paving the way for Marx's understanding of bourgeois industrial capitalist society. Even more importantly, for Hegel as for Marx, 'this historically specific form of mediation ... becomes quasi-independent of the people engaged in those practices'. Indeed, in this sense, it is an *abstract* and *impersonal* form that becomes socially cohesive by means of its own abstraction and divisive power.⁵⁹

Can abstraction ever end?

In the preceding, I have tried to provide a consistent framework for interpreting Hegel's social and political theory. Such a framework revolves around the pivotal notion of abstraction although abstraction itself is not a framework, nor a mere static component, but a dynamic device that in Hegel's philosophy accounts for the production and reproduction of social life.

In *Who Thinks Abstractly?*, Hegel connects abstract reasoning to the effects of *Denken abstrakt* on the plane of action and behaviour in order to explore the practical relapses of theoretical abstraction. Abstraction, Hegel argues, takes on an intrinsically practical significance because whoever thinks abstractly – and sees everything through the prism of a partial and distorted lens – *acts abstractly*. Or, in other words, whoever thinks abstractly conducts herself accordingly. This is the consenting crowd at the execution of a murderer, in whom they see nothing but 'the abstract fact that he is a murderer'. It is also the egg-seller who vilifies her customer for saying that her eggs are rotten and 'subsumes the other woman – scarf, hat, shirt etc., as well as ... her father and family too, solely under the "crime" that she has found the eggs rotten', never thinking past appearances. It is the master who thinks of the servant not as human but merely as servile, and 'clings to this one predicate'. Finally, it is the officer for whom the common soldier is no more than 'this *abstractum* of a beatable subject'.⁶⁰

Thus, the answer to the original question of the pamphlet, 'Who thinks abstractly?', points to the *gemeiner Mensch* whose common sense is well rooted in accidental representations of all sorts, as well as to whoever understands and judges the world according to her obstinately limited and insufficient impressions. A different kind of abstraction, though, pertains to the *bourgeois* as a member of modern civil society; namely, an abstraction that cannot be reduced to single individual behaviours nor to the simple maxim 'I think abstractly, therefore I act abstractly', but, rather, a dynamic abstraction that *acts itself* as a driving force of social reproduction.



Insofar as, on a practical scale, abstraction constructs social bonds, builds up society and sustains the very structure of the body politic, a *social ontology of abstraction* would seem to be one of Hegel's most significant contributions to the understanding of modernity: the fact that modernity is unabashedly *made* of abstractions. Abstract thought is not a historical outcome produced by modernity, as it designates the proper mode of thinking that belongs to the ahistorical faculty of understanding. By contrast, social abstraction *qua really existing abstraction* constitutes a specific achievement of the modern era, an era torn apart by divisions and antagonisms unknown to the previous ages. Abstraction conceived as a historical phenomenon appears as the most truthful result of a time that has shattered the ancient ethical life, by opposing the individual and the community, by distancing the divine from the human and by substituting infinite reason for finite reflection. Abstraction is the fruit of this original rupture born of modernity through the emergence of the *higher principle* of subjectivity, 'a principle unknown to Plato and the ancients',⁶¹ but it is also the intellectual instrument that perpetuates and perfects the current state of division (*Entzweyung*) on

the cultural and philosophical plane.

However, abstraction not only defines modernity's *differentia specifica* with regard to previous eras; it also helps to trace a distinction within and through it. As is well known, several events temporally distant from one another mark in Hegel's historical overview the beginning of modernity (from the birth of the Roman Empire, to the origin of Christianity, to Descartes's philosophy). The hypothesis of interpreting the Roman Empire as the inaugural moment of modernity sounds very plausible, precisely because Rome is where abstraction makes its very first appearance though ancient abstract right whereby all individuals are equal to each other because all are equally deprived of political rights. The Roman Empire epitomises the corruption of the *Volk's* ethical ideal, turning it into an infinite mass of atoms, a serial combination of individuals that have lost any attachment to the ethical whole.⁶² Nevertheless, this kind of fragmentation does not resemble the peculiar fabric of modern abstraction, inasmuch as the seriality of the divisions remains fixed in itself and does not trigger the process of socialisation. To borrow once again from Osborne's argument, we are confronted here with empirical abstractions that must be distinguished from the actual (*wirklich*) abstractions of modern capitalist society.⁶³ Abstraction here remains static and, going back to Finelli's argument, seems to be subordinated to an intellectualist mechanism that conceives of the abstract merely as the result of separation and juxtaposition. Conversely, in the modern world, abstract atomisation succeeds in performing a synthetic function and implementing socialisation; thereby abstraction becomes *active* or rather *an actor* in the social world (i.e., the very impersonal protagonist of civil society's drama). Hence, social abstraction (properly speaking) coincides with modern capitalism's productive abstraction insofar as previous manifestations of abstraction do not amount to an organisation of concrete social reality. In this regard, Hegel's view echoes Marx's stance in the *Grundrisse*, according to which 'even the most abstract categories, despite their validity – precisely because of their abstractness – for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, themselves

likewise a product of historic relations, and possess their full validity only for and within these relations.'⁶⁴

Unlike Paolo Virno's interpretation of Marx's real abstraction as 'a thought becoming a thing', Hegel's conception of social abstraction can be recapitulated as 'division producing cohesion'.⁶⁵ In a similar sense, contrary to Sohn-Rethel's understanding of Marx's 'real abstraction' (derived from the division of labour as well as from the division between exchange and use) as a primary abstraction preceding and grounding the genesis of abstract conceptual thought, Hegel's notion of intellectual abstraction clearly does not derive from social abstraction: the first simply dates back to the history of civilisation, whereas the second specifically originates in modern times and remains intrinsically linked to the development of modern capitalism. However, although, unlike Sohn-Rethel, Hegel does not consider abstract thinking as a consequence of social abstraction, he nevertheless maintains an asymmetrical connection between the two, affirming that abstract thought contributes to reinforcing the material abstraction existing in society. At the same time, in Hegel's view neither abstract thought nor speculative thought can liberate modern society from abstraction. Precisely because of its irreversible status, capitalist abstraction cannot ever be reconciled – it endures and persists through the reproduction of capitalist societies. A concrete world (i.e. freed from social abstraction) would be a post-capitalist world, one that modernity could only achieve by reversing or exhausting its 'unfinished project', to borrow Habermas' notorious definition. Whether such a world – devoid of abstractions – is sustainable, and what kind of social device in this context could play the role that abstraction stemming from the value form plays in capitalist societies, are questions that cannot be answered only speculatively. Instead, what could be legitimately asked is to what extent some kind of 'practical' abstraction, conceived of as a strategy of generalisability and an experience of interconnectedness,⁶⁶ is actually needed for emancipatory anti-capitalist politics to counter the divisive and singularising instances that proliferate in the camp of the oppressed. In other words, to what extent can abstraction func-

tion as a strategic tool for mediation that would help to activate new senses of belonging and commonality among the dominated?

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Notes

1. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 2005), 100–1.
2. *Ibid.*, 101.
3. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1978), 17.
4. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 104. See also Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 32: 'The abstraction, therefore, lies not in the thought of the sociologist, but in society itself'. Interestingly, in his *Drei Studien zu Hegel*, Adorno remarks that 'Because of his idealism, Hegel has been reproached with being abstract in comparison with the concreteness of the phenomenological, anthropological, and ontological schools. But he brought infinitely more concreteness into this philosophical idea than those approaches, and not because his speculative imagination was balanced by a sense of reality but by virtue of the approach his philosophy takes-by virtue, one might say, of the experiential character of his speculation itself'. See Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 67.
5. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 105.
6. G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 221 (§183), 229 (§192).
7. Among the exceptions, Isaac Rubin in his 1927 lecture on 'Abstract Labour and Value in Marx's System', *Capital and Class* 2:2 (1978), 107–9, stresses the Hegelian derivation of Marx's notion of 'abstract universal' labour. See also Rubin's later *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* [1928] (Montréal and New York: Black Rose Books, 1973). Roberto Finelli, *Astrazione e dialettica dal romanticismo al capitalismo* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1987) develops a comparison between Marx and Hegel on real vs. intellectual abstraction; see also Peter Osborne, 'The Reproach of Abstraction', *Radical Philosophy* 127 (2004), 21–28. For a synthetic reconstruction of the contemporary Marxist debate on 'real abstraction', see Alberto Toscano, 'The Open Secret of Real Abstraction', *Rethinking Marxism* 20:2 (2008), 273–87.
8. Chris Arthur interestingly analyses the abstract / absent nature of Marx's value form in the light of Hegel's dialectic of Being and Nothing in 'The Spectral Ontology of Value', *Radical Philosophy* 107 (2001), 32–42; see also *The New Dialectic and Marx's Capital* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), and Fred Moseley and Tony Smith, eds, *Marx's Capital and Hegel's Logic* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), which includes Arthur's chapter 'Marx, Hegel and the Value-Form', 269–291.
9. Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 14.
10. To speak of a 'theory' of abstraction with regard to Hegel may be inappropriate precisely because Hegel never presents a consistent nor exhaustive account of the multiple meanings that the notion of abstraction covers in his work. Hence, the word 'theory' is placed here between inverted commas.
11. H. Heine, *Confessions* [1854], cited in Robert C. Solomon, *From Hegel to Existentialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 58.
12. G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Nature: Part Two of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 297.
13. Hegel blames Kant for considering the antinomies of pure reason as contradictions that do not belong to the essence of reality itself, but only to human reason: by doing so Kant proves to be excessively 'kind' to the things of the world. In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel refers to Kant's antinomies of the Pure Reason as follows: 'It is an excessive tenderness for the world to keep contradiction away from it, to transfer it to spirit instead, to reason, and to leave it there unresolved. In fact, spirit is the one which is strong enough that it can endure contradiction, but it is spirit again which knows how to resolve it. But nowhere does the so-called world – call it the objective, real world, or, in the manner of transcendental idealism, subjective intuition and sense content determined by the category of the understanding – nowhere, however you call it, does it escape contradiction; but it is not capable of enduring it and for that reason it is left to the mercy of the coming and ceasing to be'. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 201.
14. Remo Bodei, 'Tenerenza per le cose del mondo. Sublime, sproporzione econtraddizione in Kant e in Hegel', in *Hegel interprete di Kant*, ed. V. Verra (Napoli: Prismi, 1981), 179–218.
15. Jamila M. H. Mascat, *Hegel a Jena. La critica dell'astrazione* (Lecce: Pensa Multimedia, 2011).
16. G.W.F. Hegel, *Three Essays, 1793–1795: The Tübingen Essay, Berne Fragments and The Life of Jesus*, trans. Peter Fuss and John Dobbins (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1984), 34.
17. G.W.F. Hegel, *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T.M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 167–9.
18. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, trans. T.F. Geraets, W.A. Suchting and H.S. Harris (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991), 27.
19. Gérard Bensussan, 'Abstraction', in *Dictionnaire critique du marxisme*, eds. George Labica and Gérard Bensussan (Paris: PUF, 1982), 4–5.
20. Concerning the difficulty of reaching concrete universality, i.e. *Begriff*, Hegel remarks in the *Encyclopedia's Logic*

(§163) that ‘When people speak of the Concept, they ordinarily have only abstract universality in mind, and consequently the Concept is usually also defined as a general notion. We speak in this way of the “concept” of colour, or of a plant, or of an animal, and so on; and these concepts are supposed to arise by omitting the particularities through which the various colours, plants, animals, etc., are distinguished from one another, and holding fast to what they have in common. This is the way in which the understanding apprehends the Concept, and the feeling that such concepts are hollow and empty, that they are mere schemata and shadows, is justified. What is universal about the Concept is indeed not just something common against which the particular stands on its own; instead the universal is what particularises (specifies) itself, remaining at home with itself in its other, in unclouded clarity. It is of the greatest importance, both for cognition and for our practical behaviour, too, that we should not confuse what is merely communal with what is truly universal. All the reproaches that are habitually levelled against thinking in general, and, more specifically, against philosophical thinking, from the standpoint of feeling, and the oft-repeated assertion that it is dangerous to pursue thought to what are alleged to be too great lengths have their ground in this confusion. And in any case it must be said that in its true and comprehensive significance the universal is a thought that took millennia to enter into men’s consciousness.’ Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic*, 240.

21. Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic*, 38.

22. G.W.F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy*, trans. Walter Cerf and H.S. Harris (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 113, 118.

23. In this passage Hegel is dealing with proofs of the existence of God. Against customary understanding, Hegel affirms that the ontological proof is not a movement from thought to existence that would derive a real object from a formal concept. Rather the proof coincides with what Hegel calls *comprehensive thinking* (*das begreifende Denken*) of a content: the unfolding of the concept that supersedes universality and difference to grasp itself as ‘reality, infinitude, truth’, the self-determination of the concept to objectivity. See Quentin Lauer, *Hegel’s Concept of God* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982), 230.

24. Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 26.

25. Eric Weil, *Hegel and the State*, trans. Mark A. Cohen (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 42.

26. ‘The True is the Whole’ (*Das Wahre ist das Ganze*); see G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 11.

27. Hegel, *Science of Logic*, 8.

28. Although abstraction is a product of reflective understanding, however, the intellectual function is not limited to the ability to abstract. According to a later definition in the *Encyclopaedia* (§79), ‘With regard to its form, the logical has three sides: (a) the side of abstraction or of the under-

standing, (b) the dialectical or negatively rational side, [and] (c) the speculative or positively rational one’ (125). Here, understanding and abstraction are synonyms representing the lowest grade of pre-dialectical philosophising generally associated with the negative characteristics of limitedness, separateness and speculative inconsistency. But in the course of the Jena writings, understanding is not limited to the exercise of abstract thought and actually carries out a critical and anti-dogmatic function with regard to metaphysical hypostases and commonsensical certitudes, playing an indispensable role in the emergence of speculative thought. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* celebrates understanding for exercising the ‘tremendous power of the negative’, one that is crucial to both philosophy and life. See Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 19.

29. Weil, *Hegel and the State*, 42.

30. The theoretical framework of the new *Philosophy of Spirit* actually appears only from 1803–04 onwards. For a detailed reconstruction of Hegel’s previous systematic drafts, see Heinz Kimmerle, *Das Problem der Abgeschlossenheit des Denkens Hegels ‘System der Philosophie’ in den Jahren 1800–1804* (Bouvier: Bonn, 1970).

31. G.W.F. Hegel, ‘Fragmente aus Vorlesungsmanuskripten (1801–02)–(1803)’, in *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 5, eds. M. Baum and K. Meist (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1998), 255–75.

32. See Mascot, *Hegel a Jena*. As noted by Koyré in ‘Hegel à Iéna’, the main feature of finitude is precisely its *Unruhe* (*inquiétude*) that pushes it beyond its limits through the infinitisation of its own determinacies. See Alexandre Koyré, ‘Hegel à Iéna’, in *Études d’histoire de la pensée philosophique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 147–90.

33. G.W.F. Hegel, *Natural Law: The Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law, Its Place in Moral Philosophy, and Its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Law*, trans. T.M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 79.

34. *Ibid.*, 72.

35. *Ibid.*, 70.

36. See Hegel’s manuscripts of the lectures on the *Philosophy of Right* (1817–18), in G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on Natural Right and Political Science: The First Philosophy of Right*, trans. J. Michael Stewart and Peter C. Hodgson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

37. G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel’s System of Ethical Life and First Philosophy of Spirit*, trans. H.S. Harris and T.M. Knox (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 153.

38. G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel and the Human Spirit: A Translation of the Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of Spirit (1805–06) with a Commentary*, trans. Leo Rauch (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983), 160.

39. Henri Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity: Twelve Preludes, September 1959–May 1961*, trans. John Moore (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 193.

40. Hegel, *Hegel and the Human Spirit / Jena Lectures (1805–06)*, 121.

41. *Ibid.*, 122.

42. In this respect, Hegel’s philosophy can be considered as a ‘philosophy of labour’; see Myriam Bienenstock, ‘La

première philosophie de l'esprit: essai d'interprétation génétique', in G.W.F. Hegel, *Le premier système: la philosophie de l'esprit (1803-1804)* (Paris: PUF, 1999), 169. Just as the individual consciousness does, the spirit labours too: spirit also externalises itself, works outside itself for others, because its labour is *Begeisterung*, the spiritualisation of the world. With this analogy between modern industrial labour and spiritual labour, bourgeois *Arbeit* is installed as a founding principle of the human world. On Hegel's notion of *Arbeit*, cf. Franck Fischbach, 'La 'philosophie du travail' dans les esquisses de système à Léna (1802-1806)', in *Hegel à Léna*, eds. J.-M. Buéé and E. Renault (Lyon: Ens Éditions 2015), 179-94.

43. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 164.

44. Hegel, *Hegel and the Human Spirit / Jena Lectures (1805-06)*, 172.

45. Allen W. Wood, 'Editor's Introduction', in Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, xviii.

46. Hegel, *Hegel and the Human Spirit / Jena Lectures (1805-06)*, 161.

47. *Ibid.*, 159.

48. Although the market economy has a tendency towards rationality, Hegel sees it as the locus of inevitable antagonisms, conflicts of interest and social imbalances between producers and consumers. See also Frank Ruda, *Hegel's Rabble: An Investigation into Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (London: Continuum 2011).

49. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 220 (§182).

50. *Ibid.*, 250-1 (§218). See Jean François Kervégan's note in G.W.F. Hegel, *Principes de la philosophie du droit* (Paris: PUF, 2013), 181.

51. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 229 (§192).

52. Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 28.

53. See Finelli, *Astrazione e capitalismo*

54. *Ibid.*

55. On Hegel's contribution to Marx's theory of value, see the already mentioned Arthur, 'Marx, Hegel and the Value-Form', and Jean-Philippe Deranty, 'Théorie de la valeur, travail et reconnaissance', in *Hegel à Léna*, eds. J.-M. Buéé and E. Renault (Lyon: Ens Éditions, 2015), 195 -215.

56. Finelli, *Astrazione e capitalismo*.

57. Osborne, 'The Reproach of Abstraction', 27.

58. Consciousness is duplicated in turn 'in the extreme of the universal that is also individuality' as *citoyen* and in the opposed extreme of an individuality 'that cares for itself and its family, works and stipulates contracts' as *bourgeois* (21). In this way, the division penetrates inner consciousness. The *bourgeois*, embodying the abstraction of

bourgeois individualism, is not overcome by the universal consciousness of the *citoyen*: on the contrary, they coexist alongside one another. *Bewusstsein* cannot be the means of overcoming abstraction, because abstraction participates in the *Bildung* of the individual consciousness.

59. Moishe Postone, *Time, Labour, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 59.

60. G.W.F. Hegel, 'Who thinks Abstractly?', in *Hegel: Texts and Commentary*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 117-8.

61. Hegel, *Hegel and the Human Spirit / Jena Lectures (1805-06)*, 160.

62. Hegel, *Natural Law*, 41, 101.

63. Osborne, 'The Reproach of Abstraction', 27.

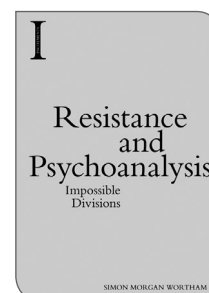
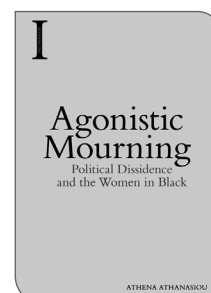
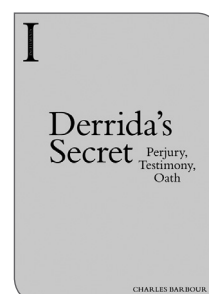
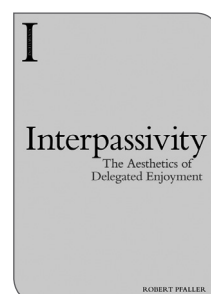
64. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 105.

65. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito and Andrea Casson (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 64.

66. See Osborne, 'The Reproach of Abstraction', 27.

I Incitements

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