

PRODUCING MATERIAL ABSTRACTIONS: MARX'S VIEW OF HEGEL'S CONCRETE UNIVERSALITY

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Abstract. *Hegel's concept of concrete universality is substantially relevant to contemporary theories that explore the level of realisation of the concept as a unity between the universal and the particular. This article will characterise the concept of the concrete universal and explain how the notion of real abstraction proposed by the German theorist Alfred Sohn-Rethel has similar implications to Marx's concept. Sohn-Rethel's theory aims to explain the conditions of abstraction of epistemological determinations in Marx. However, this work holds that Hegel's concept of concrete universality has greater explanatory power when accounting for the determinations of Marx's critique of political economy. To this end, the presentation set out here will consist of the following steps: i) a brief characterisation of the concept of the concrete universal based on the Hegelian notion; ii) a brief profile of the concept of real abstraction and its epistemic function; and iii) a comparison of the relative advantages of the former in explaining the various modes of abstraction in Marx's critical exposition of capital.*

Keywords. *Hegel; Marx; Sohn-Rethel; Concrete Universality; Real Abstraction*

ἀδύνατον δὲ τὰ καθόλου θεωρῆσαι μὴ δι' ἐπαγωγῆς (ἐπεὶ καὶ τὰ ἐξ ἀφαιρέσεως λεγόμενα ἔσται δι' ἐπαγωγῆς γνώριμα ποιεῖν, ὅτι ὑπάρχει ἐκάστωι γένει ἓνα, καὶ εἰ μὴ χωριστὰ ἔστιν, ἥι τοιονδὶ ἕκαστον)¹

1. Introduction

1.1. Hegel's Concrete Universality

Hegel's *Logic* has provided a significant opportunity for the reinterpretation of metaphysics, enabling the formation of a conceptual

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¹ «It is impossible to contemplate the universal if not through induction (for since also those said from abstraction will be able to be made familiar through induction, because some things belong to each genus, even if not separate, qua each such thing)» (Ar. *An. Po.* 81b 2-5, trans. by A. Bäcker).

nexus that had previously remained out of reach. This nexus is characterised by the conceptualisation of a unitary theoretical conjunction between metaphysics and logic. It also refers to the corresponding relationship between metaphysics and *Realphilosophie*, viewed in a unitary manner. This conjunction plays a particularly significant role in the last volume of the *Science of Logic*, that of the Concept. Contrary to the numerous interpretations of this conjunction, Hegel proposes a paradigm shift that, in fact, refutes *classical* metaphysics. Nevertheless, the question of whether the dissolution of classical metaphysics in Hegelian logic implies the dissolution of all metaphysical projects remains a matter of open dispute among scholars. It is argued here that the concept of concrete universality is pivotal in clarifying the question of the potential obsolescence of classical metaphysics as a coherent project.

Hans Fulda's account of Hegel's conception of logic as the sole proper metaphysics (*eigentliche Metaphysik*) signals a reconfiguration of the metaphysical tradition and, consequently, of the nature of the refutation of metaphysics². The effective refutation of pre-critical metaphysics can only be achieved by means of a critical presentation of metaphysics (*kritische Darstellung der Metaphysik*), which simultaneously reconfigures it in order to safeguard its philosophical virtues. At this point, Fulda extends Theunissen's critical nature of Hegel's objective logic to the entire logical project, a claim of critical unity between logic and metaphysics that can be traced back to Jena's early writings. It is argued here that there are sufficient previous examples to substantiate this claim, as Hegel's view of the unity between logical and metaphysical dimensions is historically coherent. This unity demands a *correction* of both dimensions. Both are reconfigured as a unity.

One of the most compelling theses in Fulda's account of Hegel's philosophy is the critical expansion of ontology into domains traditionally considered unrelated to logic. Hegelian

² H.F. Fulda, *Spekulative Logik als die 'eigentliche Metaphysik' – Zu Hegels Verwandlung des neuzeitlichen Metaphysikverständnisses*, in *Hegels Transformation der Metaphysik*, ed. by D. Pätzhold et al., Cologne, Dinter, 1991, pp. 9-28. This is a pivotal concept in Fulda's interpretative proposal on Hegelian metaphysics.

metaphysics thus emerges as a characterisation of *proper metaphysical* inquiry, precisely in its differentiation from expansive ontological proposals that operate outside a metaphysical framework. The rigorous critique of readings that portray Hegel's system as a form of rational, ontological monism takes the shape of a systematic metaphysical repositioning – one that unfolds as a critical exposition of the Absolute, without thereby reinstating the classical metaphysics already subjected to Kant's critique.

Following Fulda's position, this article agrees that Hegel rejects the need for ontological and onto-theological arguments in the *Science of Logic*. The de-ontologising task in Hegel's *Logic* and the critical characterisation of metaphysics as a permanent ingredient of the philosophical system would not only involve the *Objective Logic*, but this task could be read as a radicalisation of the critical project. It is positioned against a 'continuity' interpretation of 'Objective Logic' as replacing standard metaphysics. Fulda does not think that Hegel's systematic offering seeks to define what exists. Fulda also rejects the idea that the *Science of Logic* requires a general ontological repositioning within the context of an overarching metaphysical framework.

This interpretation provides a strong and significant explanation of Hegelian metaphysics, of the task of understanding texts related to questions of method, critical exposition, and dialectics, among others, as well as reflecting on further attempts to extend metaphysical concepts into areas that go beyond metaphysics itself. The *Science of Logic* does not recover the philosophy of being as a bad metaphysics of entities (*schlechte Metaphysik der Dinge*) because all this is part of the presupposition of a subject. The self-thinking investigated by the *Logic* gives an account of *increasingly concrete determinations of thinking* that signal the overcoming of affirmative ontological arguments without referring to an object or empirical subject (excluding space-time and individual subjectivity). The self-referential foundation of objective logic is understood as the genesis of the concept itself, without thereby affirming the pre-eminence of ontology in metaphysics. With this in mind, it is argued here that it is not only a question of the disarticulation of the ontological argument in favor of the *linguistic critical exposition* of speculative logic as proper metaphysics, but also of the critique of

any ontological extension, of the attempt to extend ontology to areas that belong to other scientifically particular philosophies.

By this token, it could be argued that the notion of the ‘concrete universal’ in metaphysics, as proposed by Hegel, is a notion that is significantly helpful in fully elucidating the implications and the ways that metaphysics relates to or interacts with the whole philosophical system. Hegel’s characterisation of universals as either ‘abstract’ or ‘concrete’ defies the prevailing intuition that leads us to regard universality as inherently abstract. Abstraction, in its simplest terms, is defined as the common element shared by a multitude of individual moments. This minimum, or the *commonality* of abstraction, underscores the idea that universals are not merely abstract, but also concrete. Concreteness, on the other hand, connotes individuality and finitude, seemingly bringing together a series of complex determinations. In the Doctrine of the Concept, Hegel cautions against reducing the ‘notion’ to mere abstract universality:

what makes this universality an abstraction is that the mediation is only a *condition*, or is not *posited in it*. Because it is not *posited*, the unity of the abstraction has the form of immediacy, and the content has the form of indifference to its universality, for the content is nothing but this totality which is the universality of absolute negativity. Hence the abstract universal is indeed the *concept*, but the *unconceptualized* concept, the concept not posited as such³.

Concreteness, therefore, seeks to unify a specificity that cannot be merely reduced to the simplicity of the universal; rather, it is a complex unity of the particular and the singular.

The concept is what is utterly *concrete* since the negative unity with itself (as being-determined-in-and-for-itself which is the individuality) itself makes up its relation to itself, the universality⁴.

³ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. by G. di Giovanni, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 537.

⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences in Basic Outline. Part I: Science of Logic*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, § 164.

The introduction of the concept of the ‘concrete universal’ in Hegel serves the purpose of accounting for a reality that is useful for understanding the unity between universality and particularity and between abstract and concrete. In this respect, concrete universality refers to the speculative concept in the *Science of Logic*, insofar as it is the turning point of so-called theoretical and practical knowledge. The self-exposition of the concept refers to the fundamental dialectical expository structure that allows us to account for the transcendence of the merely abstract and the particular. The proper universality of ‘concept’ refers to its own self-determination, that is, to its negative determination, insofar as it becomes concrete in the particular and singular without abandoning its own universality. The syllogistic relationship of internal identity between the dimensions of universality, particularity, and singularity of the concept is characteristic of its concreteness and the overcoming of its merely abstract character.

The *speculative* self-determination of the concept belongs to the sphere of the systematicity of self-determination in Hegel, which can, therefore, be included within a self-determining totality⁵. The self-determination of the concept involves its self-development as a dialectical unfolding of different moments as a mode of specification, determining correction, and realisation. True universality is the co-determining complexity of the three moments (U-P-S) insofar as it transcends mere universal abstraction and becomes particularly and singularly concretised. Co-implication determines universal concreteness. The negative unity of the concept is in-and-for-itself concrete and, with this, particularised and singularised. The negative relation of the universal to itself is its becoming particular and singular as concrete modes of totality. The dynamic totality of the concrete universal makes its self-determination circular,

⁵ We can find iterations on *Selbstbestimmung* in many areas «e.g., in the analysis of the concept in logic; in the sections on psychology and philosophy in the philosophy of mind; and even in natural philosophy, e.g., in the treatment of the animal organism», A. Manchisi, *Praktische Selbstbestimmung und Objektivität*, in *Selbstbestimmung. Studien zu Hegels Theorie der Freiheit*, ed. by E. Rózsa, P. Pulgar Moya, A. Manchisi, T. Meyer, Padeborn, Brill-Fink, 2025, pp. 23-42, p. 23.

complex, and unitary. The framework for producing concrete universality includes its own determining expositional process as a correction and critique of its own abstraction. In this way, the framework of concretisation exhibits its mode of philosophical realisation. For this reason, the concrete universality of the speculative concept is not only relevant to the proper metaphysical composition of logic, but also to the material concatenation of real philosophy itself. The freedom or self-determination of the concept thus extends to the sphere of nature and spirit. Therefore, Hegel's self-same exposition of the concept is the exposition of freedom.

1.2. Sohn-Rethel's Real Abstraction

The concept of real abstraction has a completely different purpose. It does not point to a metaphysical dimension as in Hegel, but it does feature a point of convergence with respect to the relationship between universality and reality. The intellectual tradition of the concept of real abstraction aims to provide an 'epistemologically' coherent basis for the theory of value and, in general, for the approach to determining socio-economic relations based on the model of socialisation in Marx. While both the concepts of concrete universal and real abstraction express a relationship concerned with the way in which a given abstraction actually becomes real, the particularity of the latter concept, for Sohn-Rethel, resides, however, in its abstract concretisation. This process occurs without necessarily appealing to the rational root of its concreteness; therefore, it can be deduced purely from human action and not as a product of the concept.

For Sohn-Rethel, the concept of 'real abstraction' points to an abstraction that is not 'generated by reason', and therefore not generated speculatively, but resides in the very action of individuals in exchange. This concept aims to concretise what Marx had attempted to formulate regarding the nature of capitalist exchange as an abstract, anonymous domination of intentional action. Sohn-Rethel is mainly concerned with the diagnosis of the social unconscious that is produced by the process of abstraction. The social appearance of the commodity reproduces the reified character of the commodity's fetishistic abstractions, which are shown as given and fetishised in the very action of commodities:

The analysis of reification, in the figure [*Gestalt*] of the genetic connections between the commodity form and the form of thought, which it encounters in its deductive process, provides the critical questions as hypotheses with which the materialist study of history must approach the available empirical material. The previous critical analysis of reification, on the one hand, removes the appearance of timeless validity from the logical categories of thought, and, on the other hand, deprives historical empiricism of its character of facticity. In both of these inseparable moments, we see the analysis of reification as an indispensable preparation for materialist historical research⁶.

The automatic reduction of qualitatively diverse, human, and social relations to quantitative, fictionally abstract relations will be, for Sohn-Rethel, a crucial element in the theoretical rejection of the merely rational origin of forms of abstraction. The conceptual universe opened up by Sohn-Rethel aims to render theoretically dense the abstract interdependence between subjects manifested in action. For Sohn-Rethel, it is in exchange that the spheres of relation and consumption are mediated through the commodity-money, an abstraction that appears to be socially and immediately valid. However, the category of real abstraction is used by Sohn-Rethel as an ontological and pre-epistemological explanation⁷.

The following pages maintain that Hegel's formulation of the concrete universal not only coincides in terms of its argument with

⁶ A. Sohn-Rethel, *Zur kritischen Liquidierung des Apriorismus. Eine materialistische Untersuchung (mit Randbemerkungen von Walter Benjamin)*, in Id., *Warenform und Denkform. Aufsätze*, Frankfurt a.M., Europa-Verlag, pp. 27-85, p. 30.

⁷ Acosta emphasises this very last aspect: «By not taking into account abstract labour as a value through the measurement of the expenditure of human labor power in undifferentiated units of abstract time, Sohn-Rethel tends to ontologise the sphere of exchange by seeing in it the origin of the dual root of the commodity – use value and exchange value – and therefore, deriving from the exchange process the homogenizing effect of general interchangeability» (L. Acosta, *Límites y alcances del concepto de Abstracción Real de Sohn-Rethel para un análisis marxiano de la actualidad capitalista desde la óptica de las Nuevas Lecturas de Marx*, «Revista de filosofía», XLVI (2), 2021, pp. 419-433, p. 429, footnote 34).

Sohn-Rethel's proposal of a *real abstraction* (*Realabstraktion*) in Marx, but also has a greater ability to explain and elucidate the nature of the determinations we find in Marx's critique of political economy. The concreteness of universality can be expressed in Marx as follows: the *real* occupies a position of priority for the conditions of abstraction in general. In a determinate way, this demand in particular is revealed in the critical development of bourgeois society. The concrete universal circumscribes a plurality of intersubjective relations of the real. Not only is it a common principle, but it is also realised in particular instances and requires a formative exposition, which we will call, in our terms, the *formative exposition of capital* (*bildende Darstellung des Kapitals*). In this respect, the concept of capital, as the main and initial example of Marx's critique of political economy, fulfils its categorical function as a non-ontological conception of concrete universality, insofar as it is conceived as an abstraction that has its material basis in a reality erected in what is a relationship between subjects.

2. *The Abstract and the Concrete in the Commodity*

Broadly speaking, it may be convincingly argued that one of Marx's principal critiques of 'idealism' lies in his attempt to overcome the radical exteriority of the Hegelian Idea – conceived as a kind of 'demiurge' that 'creates' material reality. Setting aside the question of how accurately Marx interprets Hegel, what emerges clearly is his intention to expose an 'uncritical idealism' that posits the abstract Idea as the foundation of material existence. This critique recurs throughout Marx's work and is particularly prominent in *The German Ideology*. In contrast, Marx's emphasis on materiality serves to ground the concrete within the historically determined relations of political economy.

So, the abstract exchange of commodities appears as the simplest moment of a socialised totality. Simple, here, means universally abstract. The most abstract point of social formation. Now, even though they are universally abstract, exchange, value and the commodity express, however simple they may be, a certain concreteness, a certain degree of determination of social formation. Neither in

Hegel nor in Marx are abstract and concrete completely separate logical operators. Instead, they include the possibility of continuous determination and, therefore, of the concretisation of the relations they signify. To concretise is to *de-abstract*. Abstraction involves the suppression and exclusion of accidents and contingencies from determinations. Building an exposition in an orderly and methodological fashion from the simplest abstractions to the most complex concretisations is the task of every method. This is the unifying characteristic of the totality that a formative exposition (*bildende Darstellung*) aims to show.

As a preliminary, let us remain at the level of the process of exchange. Thanks to exchange it becomes possible to formally mediate two objects characterised by a simple existence (*Dasein*) within the sphere of political economy. These objects are commodities. The very fact that we are allowed to formulate a criterion of abstraction in this exchange process is part of Marx's epistemological demand for a determinate and internally coherent *mode of exposition* (*Darstellungsweise*), which differs from the needs of empirical research (*Forschungsweise*). The formation (*Bildung*) of the social, as a progressive exposition of the determinations of capital, is a methodological requirement.

The presence of abstraction in the conceptual formation process is intended to highlight its role as a determining component of the social sphere. The social totality is understood through the characterisation of the concrete universality of capital, conceived as an impersonal form of domination that permeates each moment of the exposition. That is, capital dominates the presentational chain of the totality of bourgeois society. The exposition of political economy, however, constitutes a fundamental critical determination of the method as such. Marx's adoption of the classical (here, in the sense of Hegel) non-ontological metaphysical procedure involves the adoption of a conceptual toolkit that aspires to overcome «subjective self-relations based on social-structural preconditions»⁸, in particular because the bourgeois procedure appears as a deficient, presuppositionless theory of intersubjectivity. The expository

⁸ H. Fink-Eitel, *Dialektik und Sozialethik*, Bodenheim, Athenaeum, 1987, p. 164.

critique of capital examines the contradictory nature of fundamental relations that lead to concrete results: the systematic reification of the determinations appropriate to production on the one hand, and the subjectivation of its material foundations on the other.

The formative exposition of capital (*bildende Darstellung des Kapitals*) progressively concretises the (impersonal) universality of capital in a negative/critical manner. Capital is understood as a concrete universal, because:

- i) it is a general and generative concept of the whole of the critique of political economy.
- ii) it gives meaning to all the other determinations of political economy.
- iii) as a *concept* it expresses a unitary relation of universality, particularity and singularity
- iv) the concretisation of capital, as a 'real abstraction', is reflected *correctively, negatively* by way of a formative exposition of bourgeois society.
- v) The functions of capital rule over all the other determinations of political economy. As such, the determinations are instances of capital itself. This domination is defined as the power to *command* and *dispose* of all other instances.

This shows that exchange relations are dominated by modes of abstraction that are immanent and universal. In this sense, the theory of value implied in the exchange process is a theory of the formation of capital itself. By this token, when the reader arrives at the theory of value, the preceding stages of Marx's exposition are retrospectively endowed with greater meaning. The domination of capital as an impersonal force means that its power to *command* and *dispose of* the general relations of production is guaranteed by the concrete character that its own universality makes possible.

For Sohn-Rethel, as a particularly attentive scholar of the relationship between epistemology and the theory of capital, all abstraction has been thematised by the philosophical tradition as an exclusive matter of consciousness itself, that is, as a problem of the production of the Self. Thus, his conception of real abstraction (*Realabstraktion*) aims to respond to a standardised formal abstraction. His conception, however, lacks precision. Sohn-Rethel

overlooks the ‘material’ function of the Hegelian concrete universal, which aims to illustrate the same goal as the real abstraction he proposes. Moreover, Hegel’s concrete universal exhibits a greater conceptual capacity to account for the epistemological nature of capital than the notion of real abstraction, insofar as the latter overlooks the practical syllogistic requirement of capital.

In this respect, Hegel’s alternative, insofar as it exhibits greater categorical consistency, is in a better position to account for this categorical requirement. Hegel conceives the concrete universal as an epistemological nomenclature that can be realised in different spheres of his system. Concrete universality is not only a means of expressing the pure concept in the *Logic*; it manages the transition that leads to its realisation. The concrete universal demonstrates the way in which we conceptually know the real.

In the social process of abstraction, the exchange of commodities figures as the homogeneous and simplified sphere of contingencies in which products interact in a symmetrical manner. The homogenisation of the simple conditions of exchange expressed at the beginning of the first chapter of *Capital* expresses a mode of abstraction of the particularity of ‘things’, with a view to turning them into commodities with a universally determined semantic charge. Particular objects realise the value form as commodities that are determinately individualizable but universally equivalent. Exchange possesses a logic of naturalisation that makes this formal mode of commodity equivalences appear as a natural mode of social interaction, with value appearing as a *social property* (*gesellschaftliche Eigenschaft*)⁹.

On the one hand, we can conceive of a collective subjectivity, such as ‘society’ or, specifically, ‘bourgeois society’, as a concrete universal. On the other, as a category, capital itself can also be conceived of as a concrete universal. In Hegelian terms, what is concretely universal about bourgeois society is its consideration of individuals as personifications under an abstract law of value. The universality of capital lies in the way the determinations of bourgeois

⁹ K. Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*, vol. I, in *Marx-Engels-Werke* 23, Berlin, Dietz, 1965, p. 98.

society itself appear as mediated by capital. Capital, as social *subject*, both concretises and forms this specific society as a capitalist society.

Thinking such determinations in light of the concrete universal helps to disclose the fundamentally epistemic nature of the construction of capital and of the totality of a bourgeois society that has exchange as its starting point. Whether we decide to or not, in exchange we establish a relation of equivalence. This relation can only occur through an abstraction of the contingent properties of things. It is precisely this subtraction that permits the establishment of relations of universality between particular products. In this respect, the concept of value (*Wert*) or exchange value (*Tauschwert*) is shown as a real abstraction that is based on its 'social property' (*gesellschaftliche Eigenschaft*) – something that has no reality except in human thought itself.

On the one hand, in Hegel, concrete universality accounts for a structural aspect of the pure concept and, at the same time, is what allows for its realisation. On the other, the notion of real abstraction proposed by Sohn-Rethel is understood as a concept associated with consciousness that must, without fail, refer to human action (the social) as a source of knowledge. The materiality of abstraction is part of the cognitive nature of exchange. As such, real abstraction is the result of the act of exchanging itself. The epistemology of action proposed by Sohn-Rethel, however, fails to account for the particularity of the subtraction of practical contingencies as separate from those of thinking. Inevitably, the abstraction-of-the-real confronts the problem of practical syllogism: the contingent determinations inherent in the nature of exchange do not derive their structure genetically from thought. Nevertheless, their exposition requires a chain of relational – or, more precisely, dialectical – consistency. Exposition requires a mode; the mode, in turn, necessitates a method; the method calls for an epistemology.

Regarding the plausibility of the notion of 'real abstraction,' Adorno, for example, focuses on the same problem: how, by formulating a relationship between epistemology and practical philosophy, can we avoid the universalism of the idealist tradition? This all depends on how one understands the process of producing 'universals'. Arguably, the models of real abstraction and the concrete universal formulate the same problem in different ways. In

Marx, practical abstraction requires that the critique of political economy exhibit the necessity of the predominance of the social over consciousness. While concerned with achieving greater awareness of reality, Marx's critique is also interested in revealing the composition of a consciousness that captures the real in an abstract way. It is a mode of appearance of objectivity that features not only in individual consciousness. This conception stands, according to Sohn-Rethel, in contrast to standard theoretical philosophy. It is in the exchange relation as activity where this abstraction is manifested. For exchange to occur, something must be *produced*. As such, its reality is *elaborated in action*.

3. *The Construction of the Concreteness of Society*

Developing a clear and coherent method is key to Marx's work of presenting the social formation. Having considered the impersonal domination of capital, as well as Hegel's interpretation of the problem of domination, we will now turn to the initial outlines of Marx's critical presentation of capital. The key question here focuses on the conceptual *formation* (Bildung) of bourgeois society. The central hypothesis can be formulated as follows: the fundamental task of *Capital* is the reconstruction of the concrete, insofar as this concreteness is identified with the concept of bourgeois society. This reconstruction is not merely an act of exposition, but, more importantly, a critical complexification of its determinations.

In one respect, the critique of capitalism is primarily a critique of a particular form of socialisation (*Vergesellschaftung*). In a subsidiary capacity it is a critique of a particular conception of the individual. This raises the issue of the role of society and the social in relation to capital's form of exposition, as a concrete exposition of its universality. Taken together, the various drafts of Marx's *Critique of Political Economy* outline a method for the critique of the capitalist system of production. Regarding his social diagnosis and corresponding critique, the following points ought to be made:

- a) It should be noted that in Marx an internal connection exists between society and the subjects of exchange, one that is

articulated by specific types of domination (in this case, that of capital). Marx identifies the difference that separates the various reconstructions of the concept of human being [Mensch] from accounts that reconstruct the dominant social formation. Society rules subjects, but it does so through a specific abstractive relationship: the fetishisation of value. This can be explained by focusing on the concept of society and, more specifically, of the social in his late work.

- b) The concept of bourgeois society both encompasses and summarises his continuous investigation into the system of capital, so that this concept links and structures the entire constellation of specific social determinations of political economy in a universal way. The conception of society reproduces a specific form of domination over individuals, as a result of which an asymmetrical relationship between individuals emerges on the basis of the social organism.

The first step towards explaining the critique of socialisation requires the exposition of society itself. However, we must emphasise that such a task is complicated by the fact that, for Marx, civil society cannot be reduced to an isolated definition but must always be understood as the result of an ongoing investigation and a certain systematic completeness of human conditions. The critical scope of Hegel's *Logic* coincides with the presence of an operational reading of the categorial process of determining commodity production in economic terms, which brings the concept of society into play.

This interpretation is critically analysed to the extent that Marx, in his later work, envisions the concept of society as a phase of general production to be developed, but in no case does he derive this concept from a 'system of pure logic'. In a letter to Kugelman in 1868, Marx describes the problem of abstracting the bourgeois concept of society as follows: «A priori there is no conscious social regulation of production»¹⁰. Society is first understood as the result of the entire systemic development of the forms of capital and as long as *this society* is determined under the conditions of the modern

¹⁰ K. Marx, *Brief von Marx an Ludwig Kugelman*. 11. Juli 1868, in *Marx-Engels-Werke* 32, Berlin, Dietz, 1974, p. 552.

mode of production, it is bourgeois. The idea of a society as a concretising phase of the continuous process of capital is reinforced in the development of Marx's thought. It stands as a critique of the methods of classical economic abstraction and regulatory apriorisms.

Marx understands the complex notion of society as a concretely universal economic concept. The close connection between relations of production and mode of production as the essence of bourgeois society allows us to understand the universal concept of society as the sum of all socially necessary relations (*notwendig gesellschaftliche Verhältnisse*). In this way, all the moments of capital-presentation are evaluated as examples of the concrete *formative determination* (*bildende Bestimmung*) of bourgeois society. In the context of the mature Marx, we can say that from this moment on, value, as the first presentational moment, generally appears as the real starting point for the entire development of capital. The analysis of the commodity must be understood as an abstract determination of bourgeois society and for this reason the commodity and more precisely the value of the commodity is the 'elementary form', simple and devoid of any further determinations of social totality.

In Marx, we do not find an explicit definition of society in the broad sense, but rather an economically contextualised concept. That is to say, despite its centrality, 'society' is not seen as a precondition for the analysis of value, but, on the contrary, is understood as a concretisation of the entire critical exposition of the forms of production.

In his later work, Marx understood society as a reflexive complexity that cannot be explained in isolation and, therefore, cannot be considered a starting point for the analysis of the forms of production, but only as a totality of all the determinations previously considered. Society is understood, on the one hand, as the simplest dynamic and evolutionary state of all abstract connections between people, and, on the other, as the universal determination of the processes of material life, synthesising the most complex interactions of all concrete forms of life. For Marx, society is therefore defined as the concretisation of a sum of social relations. Consequently, according to Marx, a notion of society as a starting point in the exposition is a uniformly weak and contentless concept. In order to fully understand the concept, its concrete conditions must first be

presented and then related in a mode of expository formation. This would still pose a new problem: what the term 'society' consists of would then depend entirely on the form in which such determinations are presented. This is an ongoing task for the critical analysis of the capital-oriented mode of production, namely, to specify the social phases in a presentation that moves from the abstract to the concrete. In this sense, the 'social character' that constitutes 'society' consists of a cooperative organisation between individuals in relation to a unified production. *Production* involves various tasks that must be distributed among particular workers so that the totality of this work reproduces a necessary unity: the *sociality* (*Gesellschaftlichkeit*) of this process is an abstract combination of individual labours and individual producers or producers of value. Society is thus the concrete totality of all social determinations, while the social, as the unified character of the relationship, is the precondition of society per se.

4. *Conclusions: Abstractions of the Social → Capital*

By virtue of its speculative or philosophical potential, the notion of concrete universality plays a key role in the construction of capital insofar as it delineates the complex first phase of Marx's exposition of capitalist determinations as a bourgeois society. The importance of the bourgeoisie for society lies in the abstract nature of the commodity form. Bourgeois society as a set of social relations is first and foremost a dynamic unity of productive determinations, which must be understood as objective, i.e., to the extent that the social characterises objectivity, the entire exposition of the capital process is understood as an objective development of the economic process of capital.

In this way, the concept of society is understood as an objective category within a critical framework. The concept of society expresses a complex totality within the critique of political economy; it is the object that concretises the exposition of the different modes of production in general. This concept, thus developed, is by no means devoid of content, but, on the contrary, when understood as the sum of interpersonal relations, it expresses the diverse unity of the essential concrete determinations of capital.

The unity or sum of moments of production expresses the social 'nature' of value. Capitalist wealth is reproduced in general, where the category of money (as a form of existence of this value objectivity) is presented, among other things, as a visible manifestation of social action. In this case, money is not only seen as a medium between two producers, but as an objective social form of mediation of the general dynamic action, as real abstraction that mediates exchange. The money-form brings together and exemplifies in economic criticism the social character of all relations and at the same time is understood as the basic form of the stages of socialisation, in the sense that money is presented as the starting point of profit-oriented action.

Society (realised in the forms of production) manifests nothing other than the coincidence of various factors of economic activity and this coincidence must be understood as a unity or sum of social relations. Marx emphasises that any social criticism would *prima facie* be wordless and produce no meaningful content if it did not first consider the variety of relations. Consequently, society could be described as the ultimate universal term of a purely methodological procedure in the system of capital. It is already the sum of the developed conditions of classes and the most concrete moment of the entire development of the forms of capital, insofar as it is understood in concrete terms as a diverse composition.

Only if capitalist society is understood as a set of relations between different social groups can its conceptual vagueness be eliminated. That is to say, capitalist society can only be critically predicated as a whole if it is understood as a concrete universal. Society presents the most concrete category. In his later works, Marx understood the concrete as the combined form of all the connections that can explain material conditions, and the abstract as the simplest form that can explain a minimally determined relationship between two individuals. The concept of society requires a methodical approach of formative exposition, since it is itself the final stage in the development of the various moments of the capitalist mode of production. The commodity as an 'elementary form' is the first manifestation of wealth, but not of wealth in general. Instead, it stands as the manifestation of the wealth of societies, that is, of the entire organic complex of human relations.