

Gegenständlichkeit—From Marx to Lukács and Back Again

Christian Lotz

INTRODUCTION

Feenberg is one of the very few authors, particularly in the Anglo-American tradition, who has pointed out that the early development of critical theory cannot be understood without the inclusion of phenomenology and Neo-Kantianism. Although the connections between Adorno and phenomenology as well as between Marcuse and phenomenology are well known, the majority of contemporary debates in critical theory are rarely engaged with the rich historical context that provided the framework for early critical theory (in Germany), which was characterized by a tight intellectual network of phenomenological movements ranging from Husserl to Reinach, Neo-Kantian schools ranging from Windelband to Cassirer, philosophies of life, from Nietzsche to Simmel, as well as varying strands of positivism and early developments of analytic philosophy, such as the Vienna school. Although all of this is prominently featured in Adorno's inaugural lecture *The Actuality of Philosophy* (1931), which outlines the roadmap for early critical theory, recent critical school theorizing has lost sight of some, if

C. Lotz (✉)

Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA

© The Author(s) 2017

D.P. Arnold and A. Michel (eds.), *Critical Theory and the Thought of
Andrew Feenberg*, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-57897-2_4

not all, questions connected to this intellectual network. In addition, the "official" Habermasian and post-Habermasian Frankfurt School theorists, such as Honneth, Jaeggi, Benhabib, Allen, and Forst, no longer seem to be engaged in further developing social epistemology. Thus again, Feenberg is one of the few thinkers in critical theory who not only is aware of the rich historical horizon for a theory of society but who also has repeatedly pointed to the interdependency between epistemology and ontology, especially in connection with his Lukács interpretations.

As Feenberg rightly points out, one of the most important concepts in Lukács's theory is the term *Gegenständlichkeitstheorie* (objecthood, form of objectivity), which Lukács not only employs in order to translate epistemological concepts into social-ontological concepts but also uses in an attempt to transform the Kantian epistemological background into a social ontology within a Marxian framework.¹ To some extent, one could claim that Lukács is the "hinge" in early critical theory that holds the entire discourse together. However, in contrast to some interpreters, including Feenberg, I argue that the essays that form the first section of *History and Class Consciousness* are at least of equal importance to a proper understanding of Lukács, if not more important than the essay that most readers take to be Lukács's contribution, namely, the essay on reification. Accordingly, in my reading, I will shift the attention back to Lukács's methodologically grounded Marxism and extend Feenberg's intuitions about the concept of *Gegenständlichkeitstheorie* towards Marx's critique of political economy. I will do this by putting forward the view that Lukács's move from the "economic" concept of commodity to a cultural concept of commodity is already implied in Chap. 1 of *Capital*. As far as I can see, Feenberg almost exclusively focuses on the early Marx in his Marxist writings and dismisses the later writings. In contradistinction, I argue that we need to recover and renew the critical theory of society on the basis of a critique of political economy that is not misunderstood as a "labor theory of value," which, not incidentally, is a term that Marx never uses. It is in this sense that I am in agreement with more recent Marxist theorizing in Germany and Italy that is referred to as *value form theory*, the main proponents of which are Hans-Georg Backhaus, Helmut Reichelt, and Michael Heinrich. However, any dismissal of a social-economic theory of society has consequences for the critique of the capitalist social organization as a whole. As I have argued elsewhere, the loss of a theory of society and the turn of recent Frankfurt School

thinkers to ethical and normative questions leads to the loss of a critical concept of capitalism, as this is no longer conceived as something that *can* be overcome. But critique for Marx, who follows Kant in this regard, means to demonstrate that the object in question, in Marx's case, capitalist society, is limited and finite.²

It seems to me that Feenberg's interpretation of Lukács's concept of *Gegenständlichkeitstheorie* not only needs to be tied back to Marx's *Capital* but also to a strong concept of categories such as that which characterizes a critique of political economy in the Marxian sense. A focus on categories is not only important for Feenberg and Lukács but also for all intellectual schools at the beginning of the twentieth century, insofar as the question of how to understand the concept of category is central for their attempts to escape metaphysics. Not only Husserl but also Lask and the early Heidegger are quite concerned with a reinterpretation of the concept of categories, insofar as these thinkers try to rescue it from what they conceive as its subjective background in Kant. For one, we find attempts to reinterpret categories as something that transcends the positioning of the transcendental subject, as something that is somehow given in life (Lask). For another, we find attempts to turn categories into units of meaning [*Sinn*] and "regional" frames (Husserl); and, finally, we also find the attempt to reinterpret categories through a hermeneutic lens, for example, in Heidegger, who approaches the problem of categories through his readings of Duns Scotus and Kant, transforming "categories" into what he calls in *Being and Time* "existentialia."

Moreover, further developing a theory of social categories is important for the following reasons: we should reject a transcendental theory of categories (Kant) that ties them to the structure of subjective reason; and, equally importantly, we should reject a metaphysical theory of categories (à la Hegel) that ties them to the structure of objective reason and to being. In my estimation, Marx's critical theory of society, long before phenomenology and Neo-Kantianism, tried to work out such a theory of categorization in reference to society, namely, as a *relation* that is constituted as something that exists *genuinely* between physical reality and subjective construction. This theory of the social as the "third" realm between subject and object as well as between mind and matter, in connection with the question of how we have access to the object "capitalist society," is the true core of Marx's *Capital*, and, as Lukács points out in his remarks on "orthodox Marxism" in *History and Class Consciousness*, removing this methodological aspect reduces Marxism

either to sociology⁴ and empirical research or to a falsely understood naturalism.³

GEGENSTÄNDLICHKEITSFORM

Rather surprisingly for ahistorical readers of continental philosophy, it is not Heidegger but Emil Lask who speaks first of being as the "being of beings" in the sense of the "objectivity of objects" [*Gegenständlichkeit der Gegenstände*]. It is this formulation that turns transcendental philosophy into a new form of ontology insofar as the true question in transcendental philosophy and transcendental logic thus no longer simply asks about objects; instead, the question becomes what "makes" or constitutes objects as *these* and not other objects.⁴ The underlying problem, then, is the question of whether there is some "super" form behind all types or regions of objects. As a consequence, the problem of the categorical constitution can be localized on two levels: on the one hand, categories constitute object regions (for example, one differentiates between animate and non-animate objects or between nature and history); and on the other hand, categories constitute objecthood or thinghood as such. The latter issue is clearly outlined by Kant in his *First Critique*; and for phenomenologists such as Husserl and Heidegger this becomes the problem of whether we can only develop a "formal ontology" or whether, as Heidegger claims, we can go further and develop a renewed fundamental ontology on the basis of explicating the history of metaphysics.

One might ask why all of this is of interest for social theory. We could respond by pointing to two major reasons that it is of interest: first, the concept of society could be conceived of as a region of being; and second, if social theory (in some sense) is supposed to be fundamental as the constitutive "realm" for all other regions (replacing Kantian reason and Husserlian pure consciousness), then it also has to be the "place" for constituting objects, as such. In the first case, we conceive of society as being based on a *specific* ontology. For example, we would try to separate "society" from other regions of being, such as nature or mind. In the second case, we conceive of society as a "super-region" that is in some form or another prior to the other regions of being. Lukács was indeed struggling with these two levels of social object constitution. This is especially clear if we trace the problems of *History and Class Consciousness* back to his earlier aesthetic writings. Further, as I will try to

show later in my analysis, the attempt to bring both dimensions of categorical constitution and objecthood together is already implicit in Marx.

The transition to Lukács and the concept of *Gegenständlichkeit* can be seen in Lukács reflections on the concept of totality. According to Lukács, the problem of social object constitution is not only related to the question of how to turn the Kantian concept of objecthood into a social concept of "objectivity"; it is also *intrinsically* related to the concept of totality, as only the concept of totality is able to explain how the different "regions of being" can be conceived as having different forms of objectivity *while still* belonging to the *same* *Gegenständlichkeit*. However, this sameness, that is, its non-regional objecthood, should *not* be understood as *identity*, since understanding it as such would force us to move, again, towards an absolute dualism between form and content and an absolute distinction between regions and objects as such. These distinctions, in any case, need to be rejected from the standpoint of a Marxian-inspired social theory, since "society" is supposed to be the "region" *in* which the other regions are constituted. Accordingly, we should not conceive of "society" as something that is "above" or "beneath" all other categorically constituted realms. Instead, we need to understand the sameness of the regions as a *unity*; and it is precisely this move that Lukács is most concerned with in *History and Class Consciousness*. Now, for readers of Marx, this should not come as any surprise because in the *Grundrisse* Marx introduces the distinction between identity and unity in his remarks on methodological issues. We find the distinction addressed in three paragraphs. Here is the first:

Hence this consumptive production – even though it is an immediate unity of production and consumption – is essentially different from production proper. The immediate unity in which production coincides with consumption and consumption with production leaves their immediate duality intact.⁵

Here is the second passage:

The conclusion we reach is not that production, distribution, exchange and consumption are identical, but that they all form the members of a totality, distinctions within a unity. Production predominates not only over itself, in the antithetical definition of production, but over the other moments as well. The process always returns to production to begin anew.⁶

And this is the third-decisive portion:

The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, 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 intuition [*Anschauung*] and representation [*Vorstellung*].⁷

What Marx has in mind here—and Lukács, as an astute reader of these passages, must have seen it immediately—is the connection between epistemological and social categories *within* the horizon of a concept of identity that can no longer be conceived speculatively. This is to say that the concept of totality is here introduced to replace the concept of identity. As we are no longer dealing with a Hegelian speculative take on reality as the “self-moving concept,” Marx returns to Kantian language by referring to “intuition” and “representation.” However, Lukács must have been especially curious about Marx’s claim in the last passage, which states that the point of departure for *both* intuition and representation is the concrete, that is, that which is supposed to be (re)presented by the concept of totality. One can easily see the relation to Lask’s reference to the totality of life [*Lebenszusammenhang*] as the proper “place” for the emergence of categories, as well as to Lukács concept of history. However, in order to operate in a methodologically proper sense, Lukács argues that we need to remove the appearances from the “immediate form in which they are given” [*Gegebenheitsform*]⁸ and integrate and present these appearances within their unity. All of this is necessary for understanding social reality. Put differently, only if one understands each phenomenon that we isolate and analyze theoretically as being an effect of the whole is it possible to understand the singled out phenomenon as an *actual* phenomenon. If we were to remain at the level of positivities, each isolated phenomenon would remain abstract. As we know, Marx tries to solve this problem of unity and diversification by adopting a *genetic* approach to social categories. For this part, Lukács introduces the concept of *Gegenständlichkeit* via a critique of the concept of causal reciprocity [*Wechselwirkung*]:

It must go further in its relation to the whole: for this relation determines the objective form of every object of cognition. Every substantial

change that is of concern to knowledge manifests itself as a change in relation to the whole and through this as a change in the form of objectivity [*Gegenständlichkeit*] itself. Marx has formulated this idea in countless places. I shall cite only one of the best-known passages: ‘A negro is a negro. He only becomes a slave in certain circumstances. A cotton-spinning jenny is a machine for spinning cotton. Only in certain circumstances does it become capital. Torn from those circumstances it is no more capital than gold is money or sugar the price of sugar.’ Thus the objective forms of all social phenomena change constantly in the course of their ceaseless dialectical interactions with each other. The intelligibility of objects develops in proportion as we grasp their function in the totality to which they belong. This is why only the dialectical conception of totality can enable us to understand *reality as a social process*.⁹

We are now able to see the connection that Lukács establishes between the form of objects to be found in “regions” of society and objecthood as such. Both dimensions are tied to one process, that is, the historical reality, of which they are both parts. As we know from Feenberg’s illuminating remarks, the unifying form that Lukács has in mind is a cultural form that he identifies with reification, one based on Lukács’s (implicit) “transcendental account of meaning,”¹⁰ insofar as “meaning is the ‘being’ of the phenomena through which we gain access to them as what they ‘are.’”¹¹

WHAT IS A CATEGORY?

The problem of categories is tied to the history of philosophy; and, in the confines of this paper, I am neither able to develop a satisfactory general account of it nor outline further steps toward a more satisfactory theory of social categories.¹² Nevertheless, two consequences of the foregoing remarks can be identified: (1) The task is to develop a theory of social categories that no longer treats the social as a “sub-domain” of reality; instead, one needs to argue from a Marxian perspective that the social domain is in some sense the *network of relations itself*, that is, that it is nothing other than the genetic relations between social categories (if we assume that categories are not “things,” but are *relations*) which, in turn, necessarily involves the idea that society is a quasi-transcendental form. It seems to me that Lukács (rightly) never gave up on this idea. (2) We should not give up the task of developing a social epistemology, which was called for by Habermas in his *Theory of Communicative*

Action, rather, we need to follow the insights of Lukács further and ask in which sense ontology and epistemology can be brought together in one theory. Though I am unable to present the solution in this paper and I have doubts that Lukács's subject-object differentiation will solve the problem, it seems to me that the problem of categories in Marxian thought should be rethought from a phenomenological perspective, insofar as a phenomenological approach can avoid the pitfalls of both Kantian subjectivism and Hegelian objectivism, given that in phenomenology "the categories can be 'read off' for the first time in their full content."¹³ Heidegger's early reflections on categories in his *Habilitationsschrift* can function as a guiding thread for this broader task. In a telling reflection on his Duns Scotus book, Heidegger introduces the problem of categories as *both* an epistemological *and* ontological task, first introducing categories in the sense I had in mind above in the following way:

If we conceive of the categories as elements and means for interpreting the sense of what is experienceable—of what is an object in any sense—then what ensues as a basic requirement for a theory of categories is *characterizing and demarcating the different domains of objects into spheres that are categorially irreducible to one another*.¹⁴

Here Heidegger deals with the concept of categories as a regional concept and a concept of diversification before he introduces it in a second, more important sense:

A category is the most general determination of objects. Objects and objectivity [*Gegenständlichkeit*] have, as such, meaning [Sinn] only for a subject. In this subject, objectivity [*Objektivität*] is built up through judgments. Consequently, if we want to conceive of categories in a decisive manner as determinations of objects, then we must establish their essential relations to the forms that build up objectivity [*Gegenständlichkeit*].¹⁵

It is clear that Heidegger is still struggling with the problem of Kantian subjectivity here, as a relation to what a thing is cannot be found *in* the object and needs to be understood as its transcending condition. To borrow a formulation by Steven Crowell, categories open up the "possibility of the predicative open availability of objects."¹⁶ However, already at this point, we can see how the same problem returns when we apply

it to the problem of society and social constitution insofar as the problem is not that we encounter social objects. Instead, what is astonishing is that we do not simply encounter objects; instead, we are encountering social objects. As a consequence, the problem of *Gegenständlichkeit* returns with full force, and it is clear how we should address this distinction in Marxist theory. In Marxist theory, we need to argue that the objects are not simply encountered as social objects; rather, they are encountered as social objects of a specific, historically limited form that is at present, in their capitalist social form.¹⁷ Only the acknowledgment of such a historically limited form will help us overcome a universal concept of history, which tends to fall back on naturalism or a quasi-natural teleology.

FEENBERG'S MISREADING OF ECONOMIC CATEGORIES

Despite Feenberg's absolutely crucial reading of Lukács and the concept of *Gegenständlichkeit*, I wonder whether his tendency to dismiss political economy leads him to an understanding of social categories that violate the principles introduced by his own affirmation of the quasi-transcendental concept of social form. In one of his central essays on reification he writes the following:

Reification is in the first instance practical rather than theoretical. That is to say, the reification of social reality arises from the way individuals act when they understand their relation to social reality to be reified. The circularity of reification is a familiar social ontological principle currently referred to by the fashionable term "performativity." For example, money is money only insofar as we act as though it were money and it is the success of this sort of action that determines our conviction that money is in fact money. In behaving as friends we constitute a relationship which we perceive as a substantive thing, a friendship. A tool is only a tool insofar as we perceive its toolness in the possibility of a specific type of use. Social "things" are not merely things but are implicated in practices. The categories under which social life makes sense are the categories under which it is lived.¹⁸

Though I tend to agree with Feenberg's focus on praxis, I think that we need to reject the strong constructivism that moves into his understanding of social categories such as money. We can do this on the basis of Lukács, though, insofar as he claims that social categories, such as

money, are not "separated" things that receive their meaning through "actions" and that, instead, each social category can only receive its meaning through the genetic relations that are contained in them and are unified. Put differently, though Feenberg is right in pointing to social praxis as the underlying "essence" of social things, such as technologies, we need more carefully argue in regard to social categories, since categories are explicitly constituting the social form as a whole. Social categories, then, can only be changed when the whole changes and, as a consequence, a theory of revolution or radical change must be combined with an epistemology of the categories themselves. In the case of money, this is even more important than in other examples, as it is clear that the entire problem of money can be disconnected neither from the commodity form nor from the capital form. As Marx argues, money in the capitalist social organization can only be understood as a form of capital. It is already determined by the capital form in each of its movements, and it can, therefore, be related to the unity, that is, the totality of capitalist social organization. As a consequence, the meaning of each category can only change if all relations that are genetically contained in each category change. However, Feenberg's interpretation of money in the above quote comes close to a subjective concept of money (and value) because it seems to imply that we could simply stop taking money as money. I reject this position, however, since the "meaning" of money can only change if we would live in a reality in which money would no longer genetically imply capital form and commodity form, which, in turn, presupposes that the unity (that is, totality) of these relations has shifted.¹⁹ Put in phenomenological language, we could also say that the world in which money exists as this specific, for example, capitalist form of money, must change. In order to clarify this further, let me now turn to a re-reading of Chap. I of *Capital*, since two crucial distinctions that Marx introduces at the beginning of *Capital*, namely, the distinction between commodity and commodity form, as well as the distinction between use value and exchange value, are essential for a proper understanding of his thought. Indeed, the latter distinction is especially important in regard to Marx's claim that value as the constitutive unity of capitalist society is neither a physical nor a mental phenomenon.

A RE-READING OF CHAPTER ONE OF CAPITAL AND THE RETURN TO MARX'S CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

The distinction between use value and exchange value has been discussed often in the literature, and I do not intend to repeat the most obvious views about that here. However, it is of crucial importance to note that this distinction tends to be treated as an absolute distinction, that is, as if we can encounter things in capitalism as either use values or exchange values and as if in non-capitalist societies there would simply be use values. For example, David Harvey's most recent book, unfortunately, presents a reading that artificially separates use and exchange value, identifying them as two ways in which commodities can function in capitalism.²⁰ As I argue in the following, this reading is misguided and misses the central point that Marx works out in chapter one of *Capital*, namely, that things in a society that finds its unity in money and is actualized as abstract labor can never be "just" use values, that is, things to be used. Three main reasons for this thesis are the following.

First, in the further development of the categories in *Capital*, the distinction between use value and exchange value becomes an internal distinction of capital and abstract labor. Accordingly, although Marx seems to introduce the distinction as an absolute distinction between use value as something that exists in all social formations, and exchange value that only has a place in particular societies that are determined by the capitalist mode of production, the further discussion of the internal relations implied in categories such as money and capital reveals that use value is a dialectical concept. As a consequence, the concept of use value should not be conceived as something "external" or outside the system. Use value, in other words, takes on a specific form under which it exists in capitalist social formation. Only this allows Marx to speak of a contradiction between use value and exchange value. If the use value of commodities were really independent of its being a commodity, then a contradiction in capitalism between use and exchange could never occur, since one side of the contradiction would not belong to capitalism specifically. In addition, in the nineteenth century, "Gebrauchswert" was used as with a synonym for "Gebrauchsding," that is, use thing or useful thing. To be sure, the usage of the term "value" is confusing, as it seems to indicate that Marx refers to a thing and its use value as something that a thing possesses as a property. However, a close reading of the text should allow readers to come to the conclusion that by "use value" Marx refers

to the *thing*. For example, in his important clarifications that Marx offers in 1881 under the title *Notes on Adolph Wagner*, he writes the following:

What I proceed from is the simplest social form in which the product of labour presents itself in contemporary society, and this is the "commodity." This I analyse, initially in the form in which it appears. Here I find that on the one hand in its natural form it is a *thing for use* (*Gebrauchsding*), alias a *use-value*; on the other hand, a *bearer of exchange-value*, and from this point of view it is itself an "exchange-value." Further analysis of the latter shows me that exchange-value is merely a "form of appearance," an independent way of presenting the *value* contained in the commodity, and then I start on the analysis of the latter.

In these notes, Marx not only repeatedly points out that by "use value" he means "natural thing," but also criticizes Wagner for constantly confusing "use value" and "value" because the words (unfortunately) indicate that both refer to entities that possess "values" (*Gebrauchswert* vs. *Tauschwert*). However, as Marx underlines in these notes, the *value* in the sense in which he introduces the term in *Capital* should be distinguished from both use value and exchange value.²¹

Second, the distinction between use-value and exchange value is primarily not introduced in order to indicate two different ways in which commodities "function" in our economy; rather, Marx connects the distinction between use and exchange to his thesis that value as the *unity* of capitalist social organization should not be conceived as something *natural*. The main line of argument for the purely social nature of value as the unity of capitalist society and the form of all relations is the following: the usage of a thing is determined by its natural properties. For example, whether sand or pizza can satisfy our hunger ultimately depends upon its natural properties or, if we also take intellectual use things into account, its thing properties, that is, properties that it has as this or that thing. Moreover, the properties that a thing possesses as a thing are *non-relational*, that is, they do *not* exist in relation to something other than themselves. Now, if we reconstruct how Marx proceeds in Chap. 1 of *Capital*, it seems at first as if he wants to say that *one* thing has a use value and an exchange value. However, a more careful reading reveals that this assumption is incorrect. In fact, Marx himself states this later after he introduces the distinction:

When, at the beginning of this chapter, we said in the customary manner that a commodity is both a use value and an exchange value, this was, strictly speaking, wrong. [...] and the commodity never has this form when looked at in isolation, but only when it is in a value-relation or an exchange-relation.²²

Accordingly, what he says is that one thing functions as a use value, that is, a thing, and another thing functions as an exchange value, that is, the other thing. Put differently, it is *never* the case that one thing "has" or possesses an exchange value; rather, it *is* the exchange thing for another thing. Consequently, the exchange value of a thing is not somewhere to be found "on" or "in" it; instead, the *other* thing is the exchange value of the first thing. This crucial move is decisive, insofar as Marx states from the beginning that exchange value and use value only exist in and as a relation, and never in themselves. This is also the reason for the fetishism connected to prices, insofar as price tags that things carry around like name tags hide their relationality. Their relationality gets lost and appears as what they are not, namely, natural properties, that is, properties of the thing itself. Again, only if we understand the relationality that Marx introduces at the beginning of *Capital* can we also understand why value is the condition for the possibility of that relationality. Indeed, the *exchangeability* itself can then be introduced by Marx as a social concept. As stated in *Capital*, value is the "form of direct exchangeability,"²³ which is to say that the exchangeability appears to us as something immediate and something that we do not need to establish, as it is presupposed as the *Gegenständlichkeit*form. A commodity "seems to be endowed with its equivalent form, its property of direct exchangeability, by nature" (emphasis, C.L.).²⁴ However, the equivalent form is "purely social."²⁵ Value is the expression of the unity of all social relations and never anything that can be found in a thing. If value could be found in any other property in a thing, then we would fall back to a naturalist theory of value in which value magically emerges out of the use of commodities. However, if Marx is correct with his focus on the relation *between* things, then all value theories that begin with utility and the demand for commodities are non-starters, as they do not understand that economic theory is a theory of society and not a theory of things that people exchange because of their internal properties.

Not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values; in this it is the direct opposite of the coarsely sensuous objectivity of commodities as physical objects; [...] their character as values is therefore purely social.²⁶

Moreover, he says the following:

This common element [value, C.L.] cannot be a geometrical, physical, chemical or other natural property of commodities.²⁷

And, finally, he concludes:

So far, no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or a diamond. The economists who have discovered this chemical substance, and who lay special claim to critical acumen, nevertheless find that the use-value of material objects belongs to them independently of their material properties, while their value, on the other hand, forms a part of them as objects.²⁸

Put differently, that which constitutes commodities as commodities, that is, their form, cannot lie in their "thing properties" alone. Accordingly, it is incorrect to claim that commodities can function as use values once they leave economic transactions.

Marx's *Capital* is from the beginning a rejection of any utility maximization theory, as he claims that capitalist social organization is *totally* independent of how individuals weigh and compare the "value" of things they buy and sell. Instead, he tries to show that we depend upon an objective structure that makes all things "on the ground" possible. As a consequence, the *reality* of capitalist social organization is not constituted by desires and wants; rather, it is precisely the other way around: desires, wants and needs are produced by them, being subjected to the valorization process and subjected to abstract labor as the intellectual and bodily totality of human capacities, which include our noetic apparatuses. With the introduction of the wage into the social system, it becomes possible to monetize the *entire social order*, as labor power is (1) to be found universally in every individual on earth (whereas concrete labor is diverse) and (2) money can itself become universal.

Third, Marx introduces a crucial distinction between commodity and commodity form, which is already implied in my two foregoing points.

Marx is not interested in reflecting on commodities as "things" that have properties independent from their social form; and, as a consequence, we can no longer argue that commodities, once they are taken out of their economic circulation, are no longer commodities. For example, one could argue that the pizza that you buy for a dinner with friends is a commodity in the store and during the transactions connected to it, but that it is no longer functioning as a commodity when you enjoy it with your friends. However, on the basis of what Marx develops at the beginning of *Capital*, we need to reject this way of understanding commodities, since Marx is not really interested in commodities as "beings." He is reflecting on the being of beings, or, to use words from before, he introduces the commodity form as *precisely* that which Lukács calls *Gegenständlichkeitsform* (the form of how objects are encountered in capitalism, that is, their objecthood). The commodity form is that which constitutes commodities *as* commodities, and it is only because of this social form that things that are not yet commodified can *become* commodified and can take on this specific social form. Accordingly, your dinner is all the way through "commodified," especially if we take into account that most likely everything you "use" for that dinner was at some point produced and bought under capitalist conditions. Again: if commodities were commodities because of some natural properties that belonged to things like their weight and material, then the social form, as the condition for the possibility of it being a thing in the capitalist social organization, would be natural, that is, it would *not* constitute its historical specificity. Value, as Marx puts it, is the "general social form" (CI, 159; emphasis, C.L.), which means that potentially everything is subjected to this form, and, as a consequence, the commodity form is all-pervasive. What Marx tries to tackle in Chap. 1 (and then in Chap. 5 on labor power) is an explanation for why the commodity form as a *cultural* form and as the horizon of meaning in capitalist society can be *universal*, that is, he tries to explain how it can be the general form under which everything in capitalism is constituted.

As I have argued elsewhere, it is therefore totally misguided to understand Marx merely as a theorist of a "labor theory of value" or merely as a theorist who is simply concerned with the "capitalist mode of production," insofar as this mode is from the beginning conceived as one in which value is the *general social form*. Consequently, value is the all-pervasive form of *all* relations that constitute the unity and integration of *all* social agents and *all* things under one really abstract form.²⁹ We

should, therefore, be cautious about talking about “commodities” as things that are around us. Things around us are characterized by their internal properties that determine what they can be used for, but it is precisely Marx’s argument that their exchangeability does not depend upon internal properties; rather, the content of their exchangeability as their *Gegenständlichkeitsform* is a social reality. The capitalist social organization, as we should conclude from Chap. 1 of *Capital*, can neither be naturally derived, which means that teleological approaches to social development are excluded, nor be a result of mental constructions and “beliefs” that might or might not underlie human relations. Put differently, the necessity of social unity neither stems from the arbitrary “encounter” of individuals nor does it issue from some hidden meta-historical process that explains why we “naturally” ended up in capitalism. *Capital*, strictly speaking, is an anti-teleological book and this is the reason for why we should not refer to it as exemplifying “Historical Materialism.”

CONSEQUENCES: FEENBERG, TECHNOLOGY, POLITICAL ECONOMY

In sum, I have argued that Lukács’s concept of *Gegenständlichkeitsform* as the “unifying pattern of an entire society”³⁰ (culture) is already implied in the Chap. 1 of *Capital*, and that Lukács’s genius was to develop his theory without having the entire Marx scholarship available, which is what my contemporary reading of Marx is based on. Marx’s claim that “the commodity form is the *universal* form of the product of labor” (emphasis, C.L.)³¹ is, in its roots, already the claim that the commodity form is, as Feenberg puts it in relation to Lukács, a *culturally universal* form. As Feenberg has it in regard to reification, “reification is the underlying unity of the social system, the ‘model’ of ‘all the forms of objectivity of bourgeois society together with all the corresponding forms of subjectivity.’”³² Though this seems to be a philological point, I submit that a re-reading of Marx on the grounds presented in this essay should shift our focus back to the critique of political economy as the fundament for the further development of critical theory.³³ It should also be helpful for the further development of a critical theory of society that takes epistemological issues as ontological issues seriously.

Luckly, due to his focus on technology as the mediating concept, Feenberg’s approach to critical theory offers us major clues for further

conceptualizations and stands out from discussions that are focused exclusively on power, identity, and normativity alone.

NOTES

1. I should underline that the following reflections go back to a conversation that I had with Andrew Feenberg in 2015 at the conference of the *Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (SPEP)*. Feenberg’s lucid explanations of Lukács’s reflections on *Gegenständlichkeit* greatly inspired the following essay, especially since I had not seen the connection that my own attempt to translate Kantian concepts into social concepts shares with Feenberg’s lucid interpretation of Lukács’s concepts. For this, see Christian Lotz, *The Capitalist Schema. Time, Money, and the Culture of Abstraction* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014).
2. For this, see Christian Lotz, “An der Oberfläche der Tauschgesellschaft. Kritik der Kritischen Theorie,” *Prokla. Zeitschrift für kritische Sozialwissenschaft*, 180, 2015, 453–469.
3. György Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*, Werke, Frühchriften, Band II (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2013), 175.
4. For this, see Lask’s letter to Rickert in Emil Lask, *Die Logik der Philosophie und die Kategorienlehre. Eine Studie über den Herrschaftsbereich der logischen Form* (Stebeck: Tübingen, 1911/1993), 272.
5. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, tr. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1993), 91.
6. Marx, *Grundrisse*, 102.
7. Marx, *ibid.*, 101. I altered the translation, as the English translator of the *Grundrisse* unfortunately translates “Anschauung” with “observation” and “Vorstellung” with “conception,” which hides the fact that Marx obviously operates with Kantian terms here.
8. Lukács, *Geschichte*, 179 (translation altered).
9. Lukács, *ibid.*, 13.
10. Andrew Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis: Marx, Lukács, and the Frankfurt School* (London: Verso 2014), 66 and 73. Chapter four of the *Philosophy of Praxis* is one of the richest accounts of these problems that I have ever read, as Feenberg delivers in it an ingenious and crystal-clear account of the underlying philosophical concepts in Lukács that are related to the commodity form.
11. *Ibid.*, 75.
12. I am working on an extensive project tentatively entitled *Phenomenology of Capital* in which I intend to present a core theory of social categories as a theory of social reality.
13. Martin Heidegger, *Supplements: From the Earliest Essays to Being and Time and Beyond*, ed. John van Buren (New York: SUNY Press, 2002), 65.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

14. *Ibid.*, 68.
15. *Ibid.*, 64 [revised translation].
16. Steven Crowell, *Husserl, Heidegger, and the Space of Meaning. Paths Toward Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 53.
17. For this, also see Feenberg, *Philosophy of Praxis*, 88.
18. Andrew Feenberg, "Reification and its Critics," in "György Lukács Reconsidered: Essays on Politics, Philosophy and Aesthetics," ed. Michael M. Thompson (London: Routledge, 2011), 172–194, here 179.
19. On a side note, Lukács himself overlooks the crucial importance of money for the entire critique of political economy. For a massive critique of Lukács's failure to properly understand money see chapter two in Frank Engster, *Das Geld als Maß, Mittel und Methode. Das Rechnen mit der Identität der Zeit* (Berlin: Neofelis Verlag, 2014).
20. For this, see David Harvey, *Seveniteen. Contradictions and the End of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), chapter one.
21. Karl Marx, *Marx's Notes on Adolph Wagner German and English*, online: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1881/01/wagner.htm> [last accessed July 30, 2016].
22. Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume I*, tr. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin 1990), 152. This comes close to how Feenberg puts it: "Particular social objects [...] cannot be understood in isolation, but only in relation to the whole because that relation is constituting for their meaning" (Feenberg, *Philosophy of Praxis*, 76).
23. *Ibid.*, 154.
24. *Ibid.*, 149.
25. *Ibid.*, 139.
26. *Ibid.*, 138.
27. *Ibid.*, 127.
28. *Ibid.*, 177.
29. For this, see Lotz, *The Capitalist Schema*, chapter one + two.
30. Feenberg, *Philosophy of Praxis*, 64.
31. Marx, *Capital*, 152.
32. Feenberg, *Philosophy of Praxis*, 66.
33. Beside the German value form theorists, the research network around Werner Bonfeld is also working on a renewed critical theory with focus on political economy. For this, see Werner Bonfeld, *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy: On Subversion and Negative Reason* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), and my comments on Bonfeld in Christian Lotz, "Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy: On Subversion and Negative Reason," *Radical Philosophy Review*, 18/2, 2015, 337–342.

- Bonfeld, Werner. *Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy: On Subversion and Negative Reason*. London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014.
- Engster, Frank. *Das Geld als Maß, Mittel und Methode. Das Rechnen mit der Identität der Zeit*. Berlin: Neofelis Verlag, 2014.
- Feenberg, Andrew. "Reification and its Critics." In "György Lukács Reconsidered: Essays on Politics, Philosophy and Aesthetics." Edited by Michael M. Thompson. London: Routledge, 2011, 172–194.
- . *The Philosophy of Praxis: Marx, Lukács, and the Frankfurt School*. London: Verso, 2014.
- Harvey, David. *Seveniteen. Contradictions and the End of Capitalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Supplements: From the Earliest Essays to Being and Time and Beyond*. Edited by John van Buren. New York: SUNY Press, 2002.
- Lask, Emil. *Die Logik der Philosophie und die Kategorienlehre. Eine Studie über den Herrschaftsbereich der logischen Form*. Siebeck: Tübingen, 1911/1993.
- Lotz, Christian. *The Capitalist Schema. Time, Money, and the Culture of Abstraction*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014.
- . "An der Oberfläche der Tauschgesellschaft. Kritik der Kritischen Theorie," *Prokla. Zeitschrift für kritische Sozialwissenschaft*, 180, 2015, 453–469.
- . "Critical Theory and the Critique of Political Economy: On Subversion and Negative Reason." *Radical Philosophy Review*, 18/2, 2015, 337–342.
- Lukács, György. *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*, Werke, Frühchriften, Band II. Bielefeld: Aistheis, 2013.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital, Volume I*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin, 1990.
- . *Grundrisse*. Translated by Martin Nicolaus. London: Penguin, 1993.

Darrell P. Arnold · Andreas Michel
Editors

Critical Theory
and the Thought
of Andrew Feenberg

2017

palgrave
macmillan