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# Returning Marx to Kant?

*A Review of The Capitalist Schema: Time, Money, and the Culture of Abstraction by Christian Lotz*

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## Abstract

Christian Lotz's book, *The Capitalist Schema: Time, Money, and the Culture of Abstraction*, seeks to reconcile Marx's logic of conceptual determination with Kant's logic of constitution. It is in this context that Lotz reconfigures Kant's transcendental schema as money and understands money as an *a priori* determination that makes the world accessible and meaningful to individuals. Furthermore the book's point of departure is Adorno's Kant interpretation, and in foregrounding money Lotz also wishes to 'reconnect Adorno's Critical Theory to Marx'. The review engages with both endeavours, discusses the, so to speak, temporal impossibility of such a reconciliation project and revisits a previous attempt to bring Kant and Marx together: Alfred Sohn-Rethel's theory of real abstraction.

## Keywords

Kant – Marx – critical theory – money – commodity – value

Christian Lotz, *The Capitalist Schema: Time, Money, and the Culture of Abstraction*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014

## 1 Unease in Late Capitalism

Christian Lotz is a new arrival to Marxism, as he candidly explains in his introduction: 'Having been heavily influenced by German Idealism and classical Phenomenology, Marx truly revolutionized my intellectual world' (p. xi). His

enthusiasm is palpable throughout the book in its recurrent praise of Marx's style and prophetic insight. Yet in turning to Marx, Christian Lotz does not give up on his intellectual heritage. Far from it: in 168 pages that include an introduction, five chapters, a conclusion, endnotes, a bibliography and index, Lotz's book daringly attempts to make idealism, phenomenology (in its Heideggerian form) and Marxism cohere. The concept of money links these seemingly contradictory strands of thought: money becomes the schema (Kant) that constitutes the social world by opening up, as Lotz calls it, specific temporal horizons (Heidegger). Money's determining force is the capitalist valorisation process itself (Marx). Lotz draws support for his endeavour from Theodor W. Adorno's critical theory and Bernard Stiegler's media critique. Chapter 1 juxtaposes the concepts in need of a synthesis: Kant's schema and Marx's understanding of commodity-exchange and money. Chapter 2 translates Kant's mentalist schema into a materialist language. Money comes to replace or act as a schema in Chapters 3 and 4. Finally, the world constituted by money as schema is characterised in Chapter 5: 'The Abstractions of Money'.

The book assembles all its major themes already in the opening quotation, taken from Adorno's 'Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?': totality, objective abstraction, schema and the constitution of social reality. But instead of unpacking Adorno's dense analysis by way of introduction, Lotz chooses to follow it up with a vision of the world's doom:

We are at a point in time at which the capitalist world is about to destroy the two sources of wealth, the laborer and the earth, not by only taking over the entirety of the globe, but also by the subsumption of the entirety of what was once called 'human.' (p. xiii.)

Such considerations are not simply ornamental. They set the tone throughout; the affects these lines express seem to be the driving forces of Lotz's project. Undoubtedly, and in the field of critical theory in particular, which brings into focus society's failings, conceptual labour is commonly fuelled by affects. At times, however, it seems here that money – the book's main concern – becomes a mere projector-screen for the author's unease in late capitalism (an issue to which I will return).

## 2 Marx as a Kantian

The book finally reveals its philosophical stance in the second footnote (a secret revealed):

I believe that Marx remains, with his rejection of a logic of being and with the rejection that social reality *is* logical, closer to Kant than to Hegel. All 'analogies' between Marx and Hegel remain insufficient, as long as they do not really *explain* how one can transform a logic of *being* into a logic of *social* being. (p. xxi.)

More pointedly: Marx is a materialist Kantian. This assumption, although never made to stand up against Hegelian readings of Marx, is the book's condition of possibility. Yet the ensuing analysis, far from being a compact and trenchant exploration of this perspective, sometimes left me with uncertainties about its points and with regard to my conclusions. The book's stylistic particularities, and especially its many overly-complex sentences that veer semantically and syntactically off course, turned the reconstruction of its arguments into an arduous labour. The footnote speaks to some of these characteristics too: a large number of belief-statements and value-judgements, hedging through quotation marks, recurrent italicising that more *alludes to* than actually states the argument, an affective back-up for statements through added emphases ('really', 'especially').

Lotz does, however, accomplish something quite significant. He brings into focus the often-neglected Kantian heritage in Marxist thought and – by re-reading Kant with Marx – he provides an intriguing kind of counterfactual philosophy: what would Marx have become without Hegel? To this end, he turns to Theodor W. Adorno's 1959 *Lectures on the Critique of Pure Reason* and Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). These works, according to him, began the transformation of Kant's epistemological concepts into social or materialist concepts (p. 14). Lotz sees himself 'extend[ing]' and accomplishing Adorno's endeavour (p. 20).

What exactly, then, does Adorno do with Kant? He lays bare the contradictory structure of Kant's theory of things and seeks to understand these contradictions as revealing 'the antinomy of bourgeois society as such'.<sup>1</sup> Adorno first points out that Kant operates with two different concepts of the thing. On the one hand, Kant conceives of the thing as a phenomenon, as the object of experience and, on the other, as a transcendental object, as the object-form. The object-form provides the subject with the rules for producing the phenomenal thing. Consequently, Adorno holds, the subject is turned into pure activity and the world becomes the mere material for its production: 'Subjectivation, dissolution of the world through the subject's activity ... the reification and

<sup>1</sup> Adorno 1995, p. 176; my translation.

objectivation of the world'<sup>2</sup> show themselves as intimately connected. Thus Kant's philosophy 'pronounces' that the world is ultimately 'the outcome of labor', a product, and thereby takes on a 'commodity character'.<sup>3</sup> In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno proceed with Kant's concept of schematism similarly: they see it as revealing the commodification of culture through the culture industry. In much the same way in which Kant's schema standardise intuitions and concepts, 'images are pre-censored during production by the same standard of understanding' in Hollywood's film industry; the format to be achieved is, again, the commodity form (Adorno, quot. after Lotz, p. 16).

Yet Adorno's materialist reading of Kant remains incomplete, Lotz maintains, because it does not go beyond the idea of commodification:

Adorno *identifies* capitalism with the exchange principle ... The simple distinction between the sensual concreteness of the world and the abstraction of exchange is itself an abstraction. (p. 22.)

Accordingly, Adorno comes to locate the emancipatory potential of capitalist society in use-value as the opposite of exchange, that is, he falls prey to 'use value fetishism' (p. 20). What is missing in Horkheimer and Adorno's picture, Lotz claims, is a theory of money. For Lotz, it is money that works at once as the transcendental object – it determines the form that all objects have to take on – and as the schema. As schema, not only does it 'pre-censor' our perceptions – this would imply a merely ideological influence – but it also produces the perceptions themselves. Lotz accords with Bernard Stiegler in speaking of 'the consciousness industry', instead of using Adorno's idea of a culture industry (p. 24).

Already, at least two objections could be raised: First, do Horkheimer and Adorno indeed transform Kant's epistemological concepts into materialist (almost Marxist) ones, or rather do they not see Kant's philosophy as an unintentional expression of capitalist reification? If so, then Kant would figure as a symptom rather than as a critic. There would be no project of reclaiming Kant for Marxist thinking. Lotz's alignment with Adorno and the assignment he accepts for himself, namely to reconnect 'Adornian-inspired Critical Theory to Marx' (p. 157), would have no basis. Worse, Lotz would end up reproducing the problem that Adorno diagnoses in Kant: 'reification of the world'. Second, is such an enterprise – turning Marx Kantian – warranted by Marx's writings?

<sup>2</sup> Adorno 1995, pp. 175–6; my translation.

<sup>3</sup> Adorno 1995, p. 175; my translation.

The ice gets really thin here. Although Lotz offers many passages from Marx that discuss money, there are only two with which he seeks to substantiate his claim. One of these passages is from the *Grundrisse*. In it, Marx maintains that money, having become the general equivalent of all things, acquires the power to transform and alienate everything and so renders the individual the world's master (p. xvi). Lotz comments: 'a beautiful passage, which contains the important thesis that money in capitalism plays the same role that the rational schematism played in traditional idealist philosophy, such as Kant's' (p. xvi). Admittedly, this passage resonates with Adorno's reading of Kant, yet Lotz neither spells this out nor establishes an unmediated connection between Marx and Kant. Lotz's second Marx passage taken from the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts* is more-convincing evidence. Marx writes: 'By processing the property of buying everything, by processing the property of appropriating all objects, money is thus *the* object in the eminent sense' (quot. after Lotz, p. 7). Yet Lotz has to concede that at the time of writing: 'Marx had not yet developed his later theory of money and capital ... his work remained grounded in the idealist framework' (ibid.). This idealist language was not sustained in Marx's later work, so even this second quotation from Marx is not solid enough footing.

All this said, faithfulness to Marx's words does not need to be at issue here. Lotz's project is better understood, and perhaps against the author's intention, as an attempt to reconfigure Marxist theory as such. Lotz re-evaluates the roles that money has been traditionally assigned in order to newly address many points of contention within Marxism. What exactly, then, would be the relevance of such reconfiguration?

### 3 The Point of View of Money: Rethinking Value and Society's Totality

Up until the 1960s, money had indeed been largely neglected by traditional Marxism as well as by the main proponents of critical theory. The so-called New Marx Reading [*Neue Marx-Lektüre*] in the late 1960s in Germany (Hans-Georg Backhaus, Helmut Reichelt, Hans-Jürgen Krahl and others), much like Lotz, made this gap their point of departure. They adopted an Adornian version of critical theory while criticising its pre-monetary character, i.e. its sole focus on exchange. Exchange, they came to argue, already presupposes things existing in monetary form. This critique had largely died out until the 2014 publication of Frank Engster's 800-page *Das Geld als Mass, Mittel und Methode* [*Money as Measure, Means and Method*]. Hence in this regard Lotz is spot on,

and he shares with Engster the intention to overcome any form of exchange fixation, which, Engster claims, remained preserved even within the New Marx Reading: ‘money here is always introduced as the *means of exchange*, hence there is still a fixation on exchange.’<sup>4</sup> One of the major consequences, then, of making money the central standpoint in the analysis of capitalism, as both Lotz and Engster claim, would be an understanding of value – a minefield in Marxist theory – that avoids any fixation on exchange. Traditionally there is a divide within Marxist theory between two schools. First, the school of labour recognises the origin of value in the transformation of concrete, living labour into abstract labour, which in turn determines value. Second, the school of exchange, Sohn-Rethel and Adorno most prominently, holds that value originates in the commodity-form and from exchange. They maintain that labour itself has to become a commodity in the first place in order to determine the value of other commodities (the New Marx Reading emphasizes this point). Subsequently, Sohn-Rethel distinguishes between substance (labour) and form (commodity).<sup>5</sup> A reconsideration of value from the point of view of money can finally bridge these seemingly irreconcilable positions. Engster explains this as follows:

The crucial point ... is not that labor and commodity finally take on the social relation of form and substance through their realization in money whereas money is on the one hand necessary and on the other a vanishing mediator. Rather, the crucial point is that the relation to money which labor and commodity have in common is first of all a relation *outside* of themselves and this relation then returns as their individual *inner* determination and claims its rights only *in* labor and *in* the commodity.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, money is a measure that constitutes both labour as the substance as well as commodity as the form of social relations. It also sets them apart from one another, as substance vs. form and form vs. substance (preserving the distinction on both side) *and* it mediates them. Insofar as money measures, differentiates and mediates, it is the dialectical movement itself. Such an approach makes it impossible to sustain the idea that labour or exchange are either an origin or anthropological constants. They are historically specific forms of social relations, because money acts as a historically specific form of mediation (p. 29).

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<sup>4</sup> Engster 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Sohn-Rethel 1989, pp. 11–12.

<sup>6</sup> Engster 2014, p. 551; my translation.

The overcoming of a pre-monetary Marxism could also give new vigour to the debates about society's supposed totality (a concept much under critique in post-Marxist theories, cf. p. 107). The concept of totality has become precarious, because neither the antagonism between forces of production and relations of production, nor exchange as universal equaliser can still figure as a plausible social unifier. The first idea has been disqualified by the absence of a 'carrier', the revolutionary subject. With the second it seems to be difficult to make historically specific claims, and thus it might be no coincidence that Horkheimer and Adorno resort to sweeping anthropological generalisations in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. By contrast, then, money's processing subsumes both the sphere of production (forces and relation) and the sphere of circulation (exchange) (pp. 29–30). Moreover, a totality grounded in money's mediation allows us to account for a great diversity of social relations. The assumption of a social totality would be less vulnerable to the charge of reductionism. Money only totalises as the form of forms, so to speak.

#### 4 Mediation qua Constitution

Yet Lotz's book has a curious dynamic. He clearly recognises what the claim of money's priority entails, and this results in a great number of programmatic statements. He aligns himself with the critique of traditional Marxism and with the critique of any form of anthropologisation of labour or exchange, and thus acknowledges repeatedly that money gives its form to both labour and commodity. Yet something prevents him from carrying through with these insights, and it seems to me that this something is the constitutionist logic to which he subscribes by making Marx Kantian.

This, then, is what I see as the main problem: Lotz indeed comes to practice reification like Kant does in Adorno's reading. Lotz has to understand the world as a world of objects: 'objects are becoming accessible to us because they are schematized in accordance with the capitalist social form' (p. 2). Processuality, inherent, for example, in Marx's logic of conceptual determinations, must unavoidably escape him. Accordingly, Lotz cannot prevent himself from dividing neatly again between 'labor (production) as the substance of value' and form of labour, 'in which the substance exists and unfolds itself' (p. 36). We are once again left with the traditional distinction of a substance and its form because money functioning as a schema determines (constitutes) the commodity-object, that is, the form alone.

Lotz seems to be keenly aware of the limits of his approach. This might explain his lack of engagement with Kant's extremely dense writing on

schematism and the transcendental deduction. There is not a single quotation from the *Critique of Pure Reason* in Lotz's book, even though Kant's schema provides its title (and even though Lotz defines his philosophical provenance as German Idealism, cf. p. xi). What he instead offers is a garden-variety account of schematism and the transcendental object. Their relation to each other remains obscure and this obscurity comes to undermine the materialist use of these concepts. What we get to know on this issue is merely that 'Kant does not mean by thing or thinghood a thing found in daily experience, but a sort of schema of things' (p. 18). This lack of rigor permits Lotz to move away from object constitution in the strict sense. On the one hand, he often backhandedly replaces 'schema' with 'frame' or 'framework'. A simple *Sprachspiel* (language game) could demonstrate that this is an impossible operation. 'Frame' is at best derivative; it structures the world for us following its constitution, and so operates on a phenomenological level – one might recall here Goffman's frame analysis. On the other, what the schema is doing varies broadly. The schema functions alternately as *filter* (it passively selects for us) or as something that *produces objects*, it *makes objects accessible* in the first place, it is what *mediates* our relation to objects or it *regulates* and *controls*, it *frames* experience and thereby *makes things meaningful*. Sometimes these different functions pile up in a single sentence: the schema, understood as 'the constitution of money as the regulating frame for our access to entities under the capitalist frame' (p. 73). In a nutshell, the problem at hand seems to be that mediation *qua* constitution is instantaneous or immediate, nothing remains of it but a subject vis-à-vis a thing or object. There is no place for movement, becoming or processuality, thus Lotz attempts to open up that space retroactively: once objects are given, they get regulated, controlled, are made meaningful and so on. This move, however, reproduces or reveals the 'other' problem of a constitutionist logic, which Adorno had also pinpointed: money as a schema has to remain an external operator, whether it works on yet-unqualified material or on objects proper. This becomes clear at the latest when Lotz resorts to money's origin story. It is the tale of Sohn-Rethel's 'real abstraction', which presupposes exchange as an anthropological invariant and sees money as haunting, appropriating and transforming it:

This general value form [that constitutes capitalist society, *my addition*] begins really *existing* as the money form through individuals exchanging their products ... in real exchange acts. Unconsciously and unknowingly, these individuals reproduce the social relations with each exchange act and they establish this as a *real* abstraction ... Money, in other words,



establishes itself as the synthesis and the thing itself in all of these exchanges. (p. 45.)

Money also remains external in Lotz's approach in another sense: how exactly can we think of money as a constituting schema? In other words, are such concepts as schema, frame, framework or occasionally horizon indeed suitable for unpacking the workings of money as we know them? Lotz once calls money 'the center of the capitalist schema' (p. 33), a phrase that is quite revealing. Put simply, schema and money do not fuse. The concept of money is very often employed wholesale. Capital, credit and debts, for example, are all just money. The very distinct ways in which money operates in order to become credit, debt or capital are not dealt with (neither is the question dealt with of how money acquires the determination of capital, to which Engster, in the quotation above, has a Hegelian response).

A side-effect, then, of money remaining largely theoretically unchecked is a continuous divide in Lotz's book between the analytical or categorial, on the one hand, and his examples drawn from the daily life of money, on the other: a visit to the supermarket (p. 8); the commercial exploitation of the ocean (pp. 13, 51); or the practice of plea-bargaining (p. 118). In other words, Lotz's societal analysis becomes experiential. He talks about upper and lower classes (pp. 80, 94), about the rich and poor (p. 83), calls investment bankers 'parasites' (p. xx), and money as credit is 'vampire-like' and 'sucks the *future* blood *already* out of living laborers' (pp. 101, 90). Money suddenly means the real thing. As it does not disintegrate, it becomes a projector-screen for affects, or rather, it is more likely that the work of affects prevents analysis in the first place (by keeping the constitutionist logic in place) and instead sets up a stage upon which money can appear. Such glitches could perhaps be read with Heinz Dieter Kittsteiner as re-personalisations of society's anonymous structures in response to a perceived powerlessness.<sup>7</sup> However, what can safely be said is that Lotz is quite far away here from Marxist theorising proper.

## 5 Heidegger's Kant – Becoming and Processuality at Last?

It must be said: Lotz seeks to account for processuality, for the dynamic time of capitalism and its specific dimensions of past, present and future. He conceives of money also as the constituting schema of time itself (whereas for

<sup>7</sup> Kittsteiner 2006, pp. 103–28.

Kant, time is non-conceptual and a medium, simply given). In a first attempt to theorise time through money, Lotz still seems to side with Sohn-Rethel, pursuing the idea of a real abstraction affected by the actual usage of money:<sup>8</sup>

The relation to time and space becomes itself abstract and independent from local conditions, insofar as the money form can principally take on *every* content ... Money as world money can function *everywhere* ... it no longer matters *who* exchanges *what*, or *when* and *where* ... As a consequence, space and time are becoming themselves *abstract* and *unified*. (p. 48.)

Yet such time is – although measurable like money (p. 75) – empty and abstract as opposed to the time of specific activities. Lotz, however, wishes ‘to determine how ... money ... is necessarily tied to time ... when everything becomes subsumed by capital as processing money’ (p. 54). In other words, he seeks to show that the time which comes into being through money’s employment is not only measurable but the determined time of capital itself, and thus returns to Kant, drawing on Martin Heidegger’s interpretation of the schema.

Heidegger takes Kant up on the assumption that world-formation unavoidably happens in time (for which Kant’s famous ‘it must be possible for the “I think” to accompany all my representations’ serves as remedy). Heidegger temporalises Kant’s vocabulary from the outset, ‘the imagination forms ... the horizon of objectivity as such in advance’, the operation of the schema is a ‘making sensible of the concept’<sup>9</sup> and so on. But he ultimately remains concerned with the conditions of possibility of objects, that is, the time dimensions necessary for objects to come into existence are exhausted in their constitution. The object itself does not display them anymore. Accordingly, Heidegger remarks: the ‘synthesis protects and *conceals in itself* [again, *my emphasis*] the relation of the three stretches of time [past, present, future, *my addition*]’ (quoted after Lotz, p. 78). If money operated this synthesis instead, it would likewise bring about objects by means of these time dimensions and not constitute these time dimensions. However, Lotz seems to hold that time is constituted by money entirely independently of objects, namely by money in the form of credit and debts. It remains unclear how exactly this happens. Assuming it does, time constituted in such a way would itself be object-like and befall objects or happen to them. Becoming would be an accident.

<sup>8</sup> Sohn-Rethel 1989, p. 62.

<sup>9</sup> Heidegger 1999, pp. 91–2.

## 6 Lotz and Sohn-Rethel

To bring Marx and Kant together while bypassing Hegel is not unprecedented. Alfred Sohn-Rethel famously declared, much like Christian Lotz, that once Kant is put back on his feet, it will 'become unnecessary to go towards dialectics via Hegel and his absolute idealism'.<sup>10</sup> It is perhaps the comparison with Sohn-Rethel that will help to highlight Lotz's achievements. Sohn-Rethel is not interested in Kant's schema, but in the entirety of the transcendental apparatus; he accepts its content and function and seeks to trace its genesis out of society's economic base structure. To be more precise, he sees the origin of the transcendental forms in the individuals' economic activities, first and foremost: in the exchange practice. In exchanging things, individuals, Sohn-Rethel claims, perform a real abstraction – and Lotz still sides with him here. They have to abstract away from the quality of things and their use, and subsume them under a common form, which is the commodity form, in order to be successful. Money only enters the scene very belatedly. The employment of coins, according to Sohn-Rethel, ultimately brings this abstraction to the senses and in this way promotes the formation of abstract time and space and the categories (Kant's quantity, quality, strict causality and so on). The problems accompanying this approach are too many to enumerate;<sup>11</sup> two must suffice. First, the centrepiece of Sohn-Rethel's theory, the deduction of Kant's categories from the exchange practice understood as real abstraction, does not succeed; the categories and their counterparts in exchange from which they are supposed to be deduced remain related in the form of a mere analogy. Second, society, put into this perspective, seems to result directly from the interactions of exchanging individuals. Foregrounding the schema, then, and turning it into a kind of de-personified filter avoids these pitfalls. Making money itself the ultimate reference point is an original and daring move, and as said before, it can help in overcoming the paralysing dichotomy between exchange and labour. Contrary to Sohn-Rethel, Lotz does not preserve Kant *as is* and make Marx somehow fit, he paves the way for a true integration of Kantian insights into Marxism.

Unfortunately, Lotz steps – with Adorno's Kant – into the constitutionist trap: mediation *qua* constitution is not dialectical mediation; it absorbs every movement, whereas constitution in dialectical movement is but one transitional moment. A dialectical movement is a ceaseless 'becoming other that

<sup>10</sup> Sohn-Rethel 1976, p. 72.

<sup>11</sup> See Wohlrapp 1975, pp. 160–243.

has to be taken back'.<sup>12</sup> Money can come to do what Lotz wants it to do only when it is understood as this movement itself. Lotz's instincts are all good; the execution is still insufficient. My advice: 'a return' to Hegel (and thus a reconsideration of the second footnote's claim)!

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<sup>12</sup> Hegel 1977, p. 42.