

# TIME'S CARCASS

Marx and Lukács on abstract time and the capitalist order of appearance

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines Marx's and Lukács's concept of time in relation to the capitalist order of appearances. It argues that Marx as well as Lukács weaponized a certain understanding of abstract time for the critique of capitalism, that can be traced back to Kant's transcendental aesthetics. It argues that time as inner sense (Kant) under capitalism becomes the inner sense of capital, understood as "automatic subject".

## KEYWORDS

time; Marx; Lukács; reification; automatic subject

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## A CARÇA DO TEMPO

Marx e Lukács sobre o tempo abstrato e a ordem capitalista da aparência

### RESUMO

Este artigo examina o conceito de tempo de Marx e Lukács em relação à ordem capitalista das aparências. Argumenta-se que Marx e Lukács arregimentaram uma certa compreensão do tempo abstrato para a crítica do capitalismo, que pode ser rastreada até a estética transcendental de Kant, e que o tempo como sentido interno (Kant) sob o capitalismo se torna o sentido interno do capital, entendido como "sujeito automático".

### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

tempo; Marx; Lukács; reificação; sujeito automático

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*... a parody of human time, reduced to  
eternity, the eternity of matter.*

Louis Althusser

According to a critique by Giorgio Agamben (1993: 99), Karl Marx has never elaborated “a theory of time that would have been adequate to his concept of history”. Agamben goes on to state: “The vulgar representation of time as a precise and homogeneous continuum has thus diluted the Marxist concept of history: it has become the hidden breach through which ideology has crept into the citadel of historical materialism” (ibid.: 91). Although Marx himself states in the *Grundrisse* that “The economy of time is wherein all economy resolves itself”, it is true that he has never written an explicit theory of time compa-

nable to Book IV of Aristotle's *Physics* or Kant's *Transcendental Aesthetics*.<sup>1</sup> But why does this open the pathway for 'ideology'? "Every concept of history", Agamben says, "is connected to a certain experience of time" (ibid.). For him, it follows that revolutionary theory therefore needs to revolutionise the *concept* of time. He goes on to trace the development of the concept of time as "a punctual and homogeneous continuum" that he interprets as a profanation of the linear, eschatological concept of Christianity through the introduction of manufactories, which he calls an "*experience of dead time*" (ibid.: 96, my italics).<sup>2</sup> By short-circuiting this experience of dead time with the empty chronology of bourgeois historicism (ibid.: 96 ff.), he sets the stage for his critique of Marx: while Marx has developed a concept of history that – through *praxis* – is able to encompass man's self-determination as *species-being*, he has not developed a concept of time able to conceptualise an *experience* of time adequate to this "being-in-history" (ibid.: 100). Ideology thus creeps in through the confusion of this "being-in-history" with the empty chronology of bourgeois "dead" time (ibid.). This is nowhere as clear as in pre-WWI German Social Democracy with its belief in steady progress over time, which made Kant the founding father of "German Socialism" (Henning 2005: 51). But Agamben himself falls prey to the other extreme; by proposing the thought of

1 Not to mention the discussions of the physical question of time in Newton or Einstein; different attempts were made to bridge this gap, see Osborne 1995, Alliez 1996 and Postone 1993; Agamben himself invokes Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the philosophy of history".

2 Agamben opposes the linear time of Christianity to the circular time of the ancient Greeks. Moishe Postone offers a detailed, materialist analysis of this historical development of different concepts of time up to the "time of capital" (Postone 1993: 200–216; see also Richter 1991).

a certain *Kairos*, a time *outside* the linear time of capitalism (Agamben 1993: 104), he just reproduces a Marxist-Leninist vulgarism: revolution is reduced to a Jacobinist power-grab at day X, when the workers take over the means of production, without further clarifying to what end (Engster 2014: 151).

The problem of this split between historical time on the one hand and the “dead” time of capitalist production on the other is thus at the centre of Marxism itself. Philosophically, it is at centre because it marks a cornerstone of what can be called “Marx’s philosophy of representation” – the question of how the totality of capitalist production appears in the single commodity as reified social relations. By virtue of this conceptual question, it also is at the centre of the political question of opportunism or orthodoxy. The thinker who has brought these two questions together is, of course, none other than Georg Lukács in his *History and Class Consciousness*. While today Lukács’s essay collection is – with good reason – mostly read as an inquiry into this “philosophy of representation”, it is at the same time a powerful manifesto against the opportunist tendencies within the Social Democratic movement of his time (Feenberg 2017: 111).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, these two qualities of the essay cannot be separated, but must be seen as two sides of the same coin. Lukács’s inquiry into the theory of reification, building on Marx’s concept of social totality, is articulated as a critique of the Neo-Kantian leanings of the Social Democrats; this critique can only unfold its full

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3 It is also a sharp critique of the philosophical reductionism in the Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy of his time, which later harshly criticised Lukács for being an “idealist” (Engster 2014: 156 ff.). Because of its link to Neo-Kantian philosophy, however, I will concentrate here on the critique of social democratic revisionism.

power through the philosophical deduction of the phenomenon of reification from social totality (Lanning 2009: 21). It is, I will argue, precisely the experience of the “dead”, linear time of production, disconnected from any meaningful concept of history (understood as transformation of the social conditions of production), that has to be understood as a condition of the *capitalist totality itself* and is thus part and parcel of a Marxist theory of history.

In what follows, I will thus reconstruct Lukács’s theory of reification in the light of his struggle with the opportunism of his time (I) and show, through a close reading of a passage from Marx’s *Poverty of Philosophy*, that a dialectical understanding of time is at the centre of this concept of reification (II). I will unfold this concept of time through reading Kant himself “against the grain”, showing that there is, indeed, a form of reification at play in his own theory of time as pure intuition that, in the hands of capital, becomes a means of domination (III). I will finish with an analysis of the relation between Kant’s theory of time and Marx’s conceptualisation of capital as an “automatic subject” (IV).

## I. “The decline of the great method”

Following an expression by Bertolt Brecht on the end of German Idealism, Frank Engster (2014: 149) states that “the decline of the great method” started soon after vol. I of *Das Kap-*

*ital* was published. This decline in the Marxian method of the critique of political economy lies in the *eradication of the categorical analysis of the form of production and the formation of capitalist society* from the critique of the private property of the means of production, the exploitation of the working class through the bourgeoisie etc. The appropriation of surplus-value by the bourgeoisie is, as a result, taken as a mere empirical fact; labour, in turn, as an ahistorical, ontological substance, that mediates all relations to a purely external nature (ibid.: 151). Already in the “Erfurter Programm” of 1891, the first program since the infamous “Gothaer Programm”, the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* introduced an interpretation of Marxism that can be said to have misinterpreted Marx’s critique of political economy as mere empirical statements on the status quo of capitalism (Henning 2005: 27). This apparently simple mistake led to the aforementioned “decline of the great method” for two reasons: firstly, the now legal SPD was the main mediator of Marxist Philosophy for the masses of the working class; secondly, the misinterpretation of Marx’s theories as empirical theses led to the view that, given the changed circumstances of capitalist production, the critique of capitalism as a whole needed to be revised, marking the birth of *revisionism* (Henning 2005: 33; Luxemburg 2008: 412). This new current of social democracy, most prominently advocated by Eduard Bernstein (1969: 175), consisted philosophically in a break with Marxist theory, which he deemed to be falsified through the booming industrialisation in Imperial Germany (Henning 2005: 42–44). Politically, it was embodied in the reformism of an SPD purged

of all revolutionary ambition (Luxemburg 2008), which culminated in the approval of the war loans that allowed Imperial Germany to enter WWI, followed by the smashing of the November Revolution and the at times violent oppression of communist workers in the Weimar Republic. By the time Lukács is writing *History and Class Consciousness*, he sees the SPD as just another party of bourgeois rule (Lukács 1982 [1933]: 149).

So why did Lukács bother at all to criticize the revisionism of his time, let alone make this critique a cornerstone of his essay? The answer here is twofold: firstly, revisionism was still massively influential amongst German workers and the SPD still claimed to be a Marxist party that aimed for a socialist society.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, Lukács reads revisionism as a broader tendency within the philosophy of his time that silently does away with the dialectic heritage of Marxist theory and thus perpetuates the antinomies of bourgeois thought. Lukács argues against Bernstein that, by taking the standpoint of immediate empiricism, revisionism falls short of the theoretical recognition of the fetish character of the commodity and thus fails to realise the totality of capitalist production. It thus falls into the ideological trap that sees individuals and things where social relations are at play, or, as Rosa Luxemburg has put it:

By carrying the concept of capitalist from productive relations over to property relations, and by ‘speaking of individuals instead of entrepreneurs’, he [Bernstein] moves the question of socialism from the realm of production into that of relations of wealth [*Vermögensver-*

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4 The SPD only dropped this claim in 1959 with the “Godesberger Programm” as a reaction to the formation of the GDR (Gerbing 2007: 149 ff.).

*hältnisse*], from the relation between *capital and labour* to the relation between *rich and poor* (Luxemburg 2008: 75, italics R.L., translation amended).

According to Lukács this is not a mere conceptual hiccup but something that misplaces the possibility of revolutionary practice as a whole. It does so by abandoning the dialectical method (Lukács 1971: 5). Here comes into play what I referred to as Marx's philosophy of representation: While bourgeois philosophy and the revisionism derived from it take social appearances as mere isolated, given, sensual data, Lukács argues, following Marx, that the very *form of their appearance* is *historically determined* by the totality of capitalist production (Lukács 1971: 4–6). By suspending this dialectical relationship between the appearances themselves and the form of their appearance, revisionism falls back into a transcendental model of cognition that is liminal to the capacity of rational self-critique of bourgeois thought by splitting the world as a whole into two separate realms: the irrational empirical manifold and the rational transcendental of pure concepts (ibid.: 9 ff.).<sup>5</sup>

The dialectical method, as presented by Lukács, reinscribes these forms of appearances into a historical development, as determined by the social totality of capitalist production (ibid.: 8 ff.). This concept of totality is neither an empirical category, since it cannot be derived from mere sensuous data, nor is it a transcendental form, since it is located in the social realm of human interaction; it does not deny the immediate being of sen-

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5 This problem will return in part III as it is also inherent to the Neo-Kantian currents Lukács is criticizing.



suous entities, but takes them as appearances of a social essence, that can only be found through the analysis of the social formation as a whole: “This twofold character, the simultaneous recognition and transcendence [*Aufhebung*] of immediate appearances is precisely the dialectical nexus” (ibid.: 8). This transformation of method is not a mere philosophical spleen, but directly influences the stance of the proletariat towards the capitalist structure of exploitation: in an empirical assessment of capitalism, workers appear as a mere *object* of exploitation, a crowd of randomly picked up individuals cast together and who could have a better salary, but do not necessarily belong together in any meaningful way;<sup>6</sup> in a dialectical assessment, on the other hand, the proletariat appears as a class, constituted necessarily by the social formation of capitalism and as the historical agent of its overcoming, thus as the *subject* of the social production of value, of historical action, struggle, and revolution (ibid.: 180 ff.; Rockmore 1992: 125). Marx had already argued, concerning the case of Mary Anne Walkley, who died “from simple overwork” in a sewing factory, that from the mere empirical fact of this death, all that can be deduced is a greedy forelady (Marx 1990: 220 ff.):<sup>7</sup>

Recognizing the concrete form of her exploitation does not require any social theoretical apparatus, but only the acknowledgment that her employer took advantage of Ms. Walkley. Recognizing that it is an instance of capitalist exploitation requires, however, that one rec-

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6 Bernstein goes so far as to claim that the worker becomes more and more bourgeois the more social democracy gains political influence, and thus becomes *a part* of bourgeois politics, partaking in the “common property” (*Gemeingut*) of the nation (Bernstein 1969: 175).

ognizes her membership in a class of labourers and recognizes further that it does not matter what or in what manner the members of this class produce. This recognition is a leap, an abstraction (Roberts 2017: 124).

This is why Lukács puts two concepts at the core of his understanding of the historical materialist method: that of (social) totality and that of reification. I have reconstructed the theoretical struggle against revisionism at length here, because it is key to understand why Lukács has put such an emphasis on the category of totality, calling it the “only category of reality” (Lukács 1971: 9). For Lukács, this category is central to the struggle *against* revisionism because it is precisely the realm *in* which the social forms *can* appear. It is not a category that structures the field of empirical appearance amongst others, like quantity, quality, relation, modality, etc. (Kant 1997: A80/B106) but one that opens the field in which appearances can only ever be realized as appearing under a certain, historically determined *form* (Lukács 1971: 8). It is precisely the category of totality that allows for a history that is not a mere notation of unrelated events throughout linear, chronological time (as Agamben characterises historicism, 1993: 96 ff.), but a genealogy of the capitalist social formation as a whole, its model of rationality and its concept of time included. All theoretical approaches which fall short of this category, e.g. revisionism, have to accept bourgeois society as a state of nature that cannot be further thematized and must, hence, be seen as the a-historical end of history in which humanity has finally re-arrived at its natural state of being (Marx 1983: 19 ff.). This however is only the beginning of the problem, since – as we already elaborated – every category

of historicity must fall back to a category of temporality, and that is where the real trouble starts (Osborne 1995: 2 ff.).

Now, before we dive into this problem, there are a few things that remain to be said about the category of totality; namely, how it is mediated with the empirical forms of appearance. For Lukács (1971: 92), this mediation is facilitated through the universality of the commodity-form, a universality produced by the capitalist mode of production. According to Marx (1990: 62 ff.), this means that in the capitalist mode of production people relate to each other through the products of their labour. The relationship itself, therefore, appears as a mere object, mediated by the totality of capitalist production through the value-form. Everything in capitalism can thus only be seen as a thing by relating itself to capital as a whole, by being an object of value; every relationship can only be a relationship by relating to the totality of capital. At the same time, social totality is the category that dictates the form of appearance that a thing can take on. Or, as Lukács put it:

For that very reason the reified mind has come to regard them [the pure forms of capital, T.H.] as the true representatives of his societal existence. The commodity-character of the commodity, the abstract, quantitative mode of calculability shows itself here in its purest form: the reified mind necessarily sees it as the form in which its own authentic immediacy becomes manifest and – as reified consciousness – does not even attempt to transcend it. On the contrary, it is concerned to make it permanent by ‘scientifically deepening’ the laws at work. Just as the capitalist system continuously produces and reproduces itself economically on higher and higher levels, the structure of reification progressively

sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitively into the consciousness of man (Lukács 1971: 93).

The structure of reification becomes thus the universal form of appearance in the social totality of the capitalist mode of production. Everything that is able to appear within this totality can only appear insofar as it is mediated through this form of appearance, in so far as it is reified. But also the other way around: totality itself can only be seen insofar as it is understood as the order of appearance, as a social system that demands and produces social relations as reified objects (Lukács 1971: 100 ff.). The agent of this reification, however, is *temporality*. The crux that we take on here, that I have sketched out in the beginning of this paper, lies in the double meaning of time; namely, as, on the one hand, *historical time*, i.e., the medium in which the development (and, hopefully, the fall) of the social totality of capitalism takes place and, on the other, as itself an object of reification – i.e., labour-time.

## II. What is poor in the poverty of philosophy?

We have now reached exactly the theoretical impasse that we started from: is there a “Marxist theory of time”? Can there even be such a thing? And what is a “Marxist theory of history” even worth without such a theory of time? As early as in his 1847 polemic against the French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx states the following:

Competition, according to an American economist, determines how many days of simple labour are contained in one day's compound labour. Does not this reduction of days of compound labour to days of simple labour suppose that simple labour is itself taken as a measure of value? If the mere quantity of labour functions as a measure of value regardless of quality, it presupposes that simple labour has become the pivot of industry. It presupposes that labour has been equalized by the subordination of man to the machine or by the extreme division of labour; that men are effaced by their labour; that the pendulum of the clock has become as accurate a measure of the relative activity of two workers as it is of the speed of two locomotives. Therefore, we should not say that one man's hour is worth another man's hour, but rather that one man during an hour is worth just as much as another man during an hour. Time is everything, man is nothing; he is at the most, *time's carcass* (Marx 2021: 47, my italics).

*The Poverty of Philosophy* is Marx's first *en détail* engagement with political economy since the *Manuscripts of 1844*. Written originally in French, it was translated into German only almost 40 years later, in 1884, when the occasion of the book, the refutation of Proudhon's *Philosophie de la misère*, was long forgotten. It is also noteworthy that this translation was prepared by none other than Eduard Bernstein and Karl Kautsky. Lukács, nevertheless, praises this work in great length:

For his first, mature, complete and conclusive work, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, refutes Proudhon by reaching back to the true sources of his views, to Ricardo and Hegel. His analysis of where, how, and above all, why Proudhon had to misunderstand Hegel is the source of light that relentlessly exposes Proudhon's self-contradictions. It goes even further, and illuminates the dark

places, unknown to Proudhon himself, from which these errors spring: the class relations of which his views are the theoretical expression (Lukács 1971: 33).

Lukács seems to credit Marx here with a sort of *lecture symptomale avant la lettre*. It is not in the counterarguments against Proudhon that we find the “true” theory of exploitation, it is rather through the very misunderstandings that we reach a proper understanding of the class-relation under capital. It is thus interesting that this German translation of *The Poverty of Philosophy* contains a misinterpretation: Bernstein and Kautsky replaced the rather morbid phrase “time’s carcass” with the neutral term “embodiment” (*Verkörperung*) (Marx 1980: 85). This translation, cited by Lukács (1971: 89 ff.), was later taken into the canonical German Edition of the *Marx-Engels-Werke* and became the basis for the English Edition of the *Marx & Engels Collected Works*. While it is true that there is no literal translation for the French *carcasse*,<sup>7</sup> the dry-picked bones of a small animal, a chicken, duck, or rabbit, it is clear that “embodiment” is not even in the ballpark.<sup>8</sup> I insist on this mistranslation because there are some vital dimensions (no pun intended) to the concept of labour as measured by time that get lost in the neutral term “embodiment” – along, of course, with the political implications they bear.

Firstly, there is the historical dimension: *time* – as means and medium of the measurement of exploited labour – becomes

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7 The German language does have *Karkasse* as a French loanword, although used in the narrow sense of cooking.

8 A widely used German-French Dictionary states, for example, *Gerippe* (a non-medical term for Skeleton) as its translation.

the structuring (and therefore ruling) category of the workplace. No longer does work determine time (as, for example, in the artisan's workshop), but the other way around: time determines work (through shifts etc.). But this inversion does not come without a price for time itself. How is it ruling the workplace? In a reified manner, i.e., as time that is no longer in flux, but time that is accumulated, stored away, that becomes a "*phantom-like objectivity*" (Hartle 2010: 60), "*a mere congelation*" (Marx 1990: 58), time that becomes "*a space*"<sup>9</sup> (Lukács 1971: 90).<sup>10</sup> In what follows, I will offer two readings of the ontological implications of this *carcass of time*, for the genitive can be read in both ways here.<sup>11</sup> Firstly, which might be the obvious reading, it is the worker as a person, a human being, who becomes a carcass, a mere leftover of time's feast, picked dry of all his labour-power, extracted through the means of time, time itself being the medium of this extraction (Engster 2014: 228 ff.). But at the same time, this reading brings another, more obscure reading to the fore: what if it is not the workers' *own* body that becomes a carcass, what if it is *time's*? What could that mean? If "Time is everything, man is nothing [...]", how could time itself die? "By the subordination of man to the machine or by the extreme division of labour", or simply, "as an American economist states", through "competition". Competition is the social relation

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9 For the conceptual difference of time and space in relation to Kant's transcendental aesthetics, view the next chapter; for the problem of a 'spatial' concept of time in general, also Dillon 1997

10 For a detailed historical reconstruction of this process see Richter 1991, also Alliez 1996.

11 I thank the participants of the Seventh Annual Conference of the Danish Society for Marxist Studies at Aarhus, October 2022, for the valuable input on this topic.

between several producers of the same commodity which produces the concept of *socially necessary labour-time* by setting a certain standard for the production of a certain good (Marx 1990: 33). As Moishe Postone formulates it:

As a category of the totality, socially necessary labour time expresses a quasi-objective social necessity with which the producers are confronted. It is the temporal dimension of the abstract domination, that characterizes the structures of alienated social relations in capitalism. The social totality constituted by labor as an objective general mediation has a temporal character, wherein *time becomes necessity* (Postone 1993: 191).

Through this mechanism, labour (which in the sense of production still is concrete labour), becomes *abstract* in the sense of being measured purely through units of time; time, on the other hand, becomes the agent of abstraction:

Abstract labour, as Marx calls the social form of the labour that produces exchange values, is 'abstract' precisely by virtue of this reduction of it to quantitative units of (average socially necessary) time which reduces its capital function (it is, after all, variable capital) to that of the exercise of a general 'power' (Osborne 2008: 18).

It is precisely this level of abstraction that makes time the determinant of the value of labour extended throughout it. As Marx argued in the quote from *The Poverty of Philosophy* reproduced above (and as he continues to argue with more depth throughout his later writings), it is the foremost quality of labour under capital to be *abstract labour*: labour is not particular labour anymore (like carpentry, baking or – why not? – butchery) but only abstract labour, labour *as such* – at least in



terms of value production.<sup>12</sup> Something is a commodity, i.e., the carrier of a distinct quantum of value, *because* it is the product of labour. Work becomes abstract work: *for* the capitalist, because he is indifferent to its product; *for* the worker, because the product is not *his* product, the labour-time is not *his* time. Here the figure of the worker under capitalism as free in a double sense comes into play: he is free *to* make contracts and sell his goods as he wishes, and he is free *from* any possessions that could provide an income for him. In other words, he has nothing to sell but his labour-power. Labour-power as a commodity can only be realised as abstract labour because it is precisely its use-value for the capitalist – therefore its condition of possibility to appear as commodity (Marx 1990: 34) – to produce value. It can only be quantified by time because, in order to be productive, it has to be “added” to the means of production owned by the capitalist, who then also owns the product of this “mixture” (ibid.: 161). It is labour-power’s property to be able to produce more value during its exhaustion than it takes to reproduce it, thus making it the producer of surplus-value (ibid.: 168). The crucial dialectic that is at play here is the difference between, on the one hand, labour-power as a commodity, whose value is measured by the commodities used in its production, and, on the other, its use-value, which is to produce value. Precisely because it is not sold according to the *concrete* time of production – that is to say, according to the time it would take to produce a concrete com-

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12 Moishe Postone (2003: 290) sees a crucial difference at play here: that between the measure of concrete wealth, measured by the reification of concrete labour, different commodities, and the measure of value as reification of *abstract* labour, that can only be measured through time.

modity –, but according to the abstract time of the labour day, the capitalist is able to extract surplus-labour, more labour than what is purely necessary for the reproduction of the labour-power he bought; only in this manner is he able to extract surplus-value, thus producing capital (ibid.: 187). This dialectic is precisely what constitutes the proletariat as a class: because it has nothing to sell but its labour-power, it is subjected to selling it as an abstract commodity – labour-power as such, abstract labour – determined by abstract time, and allowing for the extraction of surplus-labour and thus surplus-value by the capitalist (ibid.: 508; Heinrich 2021: 90 ff.).

But why does Marx talk of a *carcass* of time at this point? Because through this process, time itself becomes an empty, abstract time. A pure quantity that no longer relates to any quality – that cannot relate to any quality in order to fulfil its function in rendering the commodity of abstract labour-power exploitable. This is again a question of Marx's "philosophy of representation", i.e. the question of the forms of appearance under which labour-power is able to appear as value. So while it is right that labour-power is the agent of *producing* value, the mode of appearance of this value is the reified social relation under which time is able to appear as accumulated, reified, dead time: money.

Money makes time count as a natural measure for capitalist society simply by always taking one and the same unit of value into account for measuring and realizing the results of labour and relating all work to one and the same apparently physical time. In money, the measure for societies' own relation is born out of this paradox:

the unit of value realizes a *purely social* relation by taking time into account *as a natural quality* and putting it into value (Engster 2014: 229).

Here we return to the problem of the dialectical relationship of the form of appearance of a certain objectivity (namely that of labour-power) in the social totality of the capitalist mode of production: Labour, constituted as abstract labour through the relation to capital, manifests itself, becomes an object, only in its product. Its product can be considered *a* product (of value-producing labour), because it bears value. It bears value because a certain quantity of abstract human labour was exercised in its production. This quantity of value is measured by the quantity of labour-*time* that was (socially) necessary for its production. The social totality that produces these forms of appearance renders all of them highly abstract. But through the analysis of their relation to each other, and thereby the analysis of this abstraction itself, the latter can be shown to be the result of the historically produced totality of capitalist production (Marx 1990: 64; 1983: 19; Lukács 1971: 87). At the same time, it is part and parcel of this totality to produce this order of appearance as *seemingly* natural. A critique of this order of appearance thus has to be, at the same time, a critique of this naturalisation. It is here that we come back to Marx's critique of Proudhon and Lukács's critique of revisionism. That which is poor in the poverty of philosophy, then, is not just the conceptual empiricism of Proudhon, but the whole theorisation of labour that accepts this order of appearance as the natural order a priori, of which no further ground can be offered (Kant 1997: B145 ff.). It is now clear, too, why

Lukács spent so much time on refuting the “antinomies of bourgeois thought”. This paradox of the naturalization of abstract time presents itself in a certain form to thought within capitalist societies – the abstract trajectory of pure time a priori, as presented by Kant. It is thus worth examining Kant's own formulation of the matter.

### **III. Kant: Transcendental Aesthetics and the antinomies of bourgeois thought**

“I call a science of all principles of *a priori* sensibility the *transcendental aesthetic*” writes Kant (1997: A21/B36) in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. That may sound like a rather futile exercise: A science of the principles of sensibility *before* all sensation? But, as we will see, it proved to be a pivotal part of the first *Critique*. The principles of sensibility a priori, namely the pure intuitions (*pure*, because without sensuous impressions), space and *time*, as conceptualised by Kant, are the *forms* under which pure concepts can correspond to their objects. In other words, every concept has to be thought under the conditions of space and time. The pure intuitions are the pure forms of sensibility (ibid.: A20/B35), the pure form of appearance (not of the things that are appearing) (ibid.: B40 ff.). Kant thus differentiates between the appearance as a not further defined empirical intuition and the *form* this apparition *has to* take in order to be recognizable as such: “This pure form of sensibility [*Sinnlichkeit*] itself is also called pure intuition” (ibid.: A20/B34). Robert Pippin has high-

lighted that Kant sees these forms as a subjective capacity, an “activity of recognition” (Pippin 1982: 12).

Space and time are thus defined as the pure *conditions of possibility* of any appearance (not as appearing themselves) (Allison 1983: 12). Kant further differentiates between space as “outer sense” and time as “inner sense”. Space as “outer sense” is the condition of the possibility that a subject *can* be affected by external objects (Kant 1997: B40); time on the other hand is the condition of possibility of *all* intuitions to take place *within* the subject (a priori) (ibid.: B48 ff.). Space is thus the form of appearance of all outer senses, the form of intuitions, while “[t]ime is nothing other than the form of inner sense, i.e., of the intuition of our self and our inner state” (ibid.: A33/B49); but that also means: “[t]ime is the a priori formal condition of all appearances in general” (ibid.: A34/B51). Time, grasped here in its highest abstraction, returns in the course of Kant’s inquiry at a pivotal point: when it comes to the question of how the pure concepts a priori are applied to the manifold of intuitions in the *Schematism of the pure concepts of understanding*. Kant’s answer here is: pure concepts are applied through time (A139/B178). The step from the transcendental realm of pure concepts into the empirical realm of the manifold of intuitions is thus mediated through time. But – and this is crucial – through time in its utmost possible abstraction, as pure *form* of the inner sense. Time, in the Kantian sense, is thus the condition of possibility a priori for a subject to be affected by appearances as such; it is the condition of possibility of any order of appearance.

We can now understand the full extent of the problem that Lukács identifies in the order of time under capitalism: the reification of time as abstract, pure quantity of extended labour-power. Time as the inner sense, the condition of possibility of subjectivity as such, becomes, for the worker, externalised, a thing to be appropriated by the capitalist, and the worker himself becomes then a pure object of this process, a mere *carcass*:<sup>13</sup>

The contemplative stance adopted towards a process mechanically conforming to fixed laws and enacted independently of man's consciousness and impervious to human intervention, i.e. a perfectly closed system, must likewise transform the basic categories of man's immediate attitude to the world: it reduces space and time to a common denominator and degrades time to the dimension of space. [...] <sup>14</sup> Thus time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature; it freezes into an exactly delimited, quantifiable continuum filled with quantifiable 'things' (the reified, mechanically objectified 'performance' of the worker, wholly separated from his total human personality): in short, it becomes space (Lukács 1971: 89 ff.).

The reason why Lukács's critique of social democratic revisionism is articulated through a critique of (Neo-) Kantian

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13 Note that this is a quite different approach to the critique of the Kantian concept of transcendentalism from the one brought forth by Lukács's contemporary, Alfred Sohn-Rethel. While Sohn-Rethel's critique is aimed at the conditions of the distinction between intellectual and manual labour through the introduction of an abstract intellect, an intellect that is separated from the practice of production (Sohn-Rethel 2018: 50 ff.), Lukács's critique is aimed at the order of appearance as theorized by Kant, understood as the intellectual (or ideological) horizon for the order of appearance of capitalist production. Sohn-Rethel's remark that Kant's philosophy is the "highest point of bourgeois thought" (Sohn-Rethel 1970: 25), however, strongly resembles some of Lukács's affirmations in *History in Class Consciousness*.

14 Lukács quotes the aforementioned passage from the *Poverty of Philosophy* here.

philosophy emerges clearly here: the conceptual order of bourgeois thought becomes itself an agent of the reification of labour through the means of time. The order of appearance which presents us with this concept of reified time is pushed down to the level of natural phenomena, like the order of capitalist exploitation itself. In the mere natural *givenness* of these categories, bourgeois philosophy finds the threshold of its own rationality (Lukács 1971: 101), or, as Kant put it:

But for the peculiarity of our understanding, that is able to bring about the unity of our apperception *a priori* only by means of the categories and only through precisely this kind and number of them, a further ground may be offered just as little as one can be offered for why we have precisely these and no other functions for judgement or why space and time are the sole forms of our possible intuition (Kant 1997: B146).

Here, Kant has unfolded the contradiction within bourgeois thought at its clearest: analogous to the capitalist economist who can only see historicity in the economic orders that precede capitalism, while in capitalism humanity would have come to its *natural state of affairs* (or the Christian theologian to whom all *other* religions are mere superstition) (Marx 1988: 19 ff.), to bourgeois philosophy this unfolding of pure reason is just natural history at best (Cassirer 2016: 344). This leads, as Lukács argues, to a naïve dogmatism, in which these forms of thought of bourgeois society are equated immediately with reality (1971: 119). While this form of thought mercilessly purges all metaphysical remainders of its predecessors, it holds tight to its own illusion: that this radical formalist order of appearance is the

only possible order of appearance. This gives way to a double tendency within this doctrine: on the one hand it submerges all forms of appearing to its own needs, but, at the same time and to the same extent, it loses the ability to grasp the social totality, progressively pushed behind the horizon of the thinkable. The subject is itself conceived as purely formal: all its possible cognitions are just cognitions as contemplations of pure relations of form, laws that unfold without the “help” of the subject. Totality is experienced as a pure, neutral “given”, and the fulfilment of these forms with content can only be proclaimed. The freedom of the subject becomes an empty, merely formal freedom of gazing into the abyss of the *fatum* of an externalised nature (Lukács 1971: 133 ff.).

man in capitalist society confronts a reality ‘made’ by himself (as a class) which appears to him to be a natural phenomenon alien to himself; he is wholly at the mercy of its ‘laws’, his activity is confined to the exploitation of the inexorable fulfilment of certain individual laws for his own (egoistic) interests. But even while ‘acting’ he remains, in the nature of the case, the object and not the subject of events (ibid.: 135).

#### **IV. The inner sense of the automatic subject**

But what does it mean in this context that time, commodified as labour-time, is levelled onto the plane of space? In Kantian terms, it means that time is somehow transformed from the inner sense, the form under which all appearances are given to the subject, to the form of appearances of the outer sense (Kant



1997: A28/B44). This seems to imply a shift of the subjectivity to which these appearances appear. Indeed, it is not the worker himself to whom labour-time appears as a commodity, he is merely the corporal carrier of this commodity; the subjectivity to which labour-time appears is capital itself – capital as *automatic subject* (Marx 1962: 169).<sup>15</sup> To this automatic subjectivity, labour-time is not part of the inner sense, since it is a commodity acquired from an external source (the worker); labour-time appears to it rather as an external entity and is thus determined by space as the form of appearance of the outer sense. This shift of subjectivity is, of course, determined by the shift within the structure of relations of production which takes place in the passage from money to capital. We have already seen that in capitalist societies money is the medium in which abstract labour as producer of value as such gets externalised and reified (Engster 2014: 229; Alliez 1996: xviii ff.):

If we abstract from the material substance of the circulation of commodities, that is, from the exchange of the various use-values, and consider only the economic forms produced by this process of circulation, we find its final result to be money: this final product of the circulation of commodities is the first form in which capital appears. [...] All new capital, to commence with, comes on the stage, that is, on the market, whether of commodities, labour, or money, even in our days, in the shape of money that by a definite process has to be transformed into capital (Marx 1990: 127).

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15 The English edition translates the German “*automatisches Subjekt*” to “an automatically active character” (Marx 1990: 133), we will thus stick to the German original here.

Money, by its double character of money and capital, thus seems to be the medium of the reification of time *and* the subjectivity that this reified entity appears to *at once*. But before we can investigate this double character further, we have to reconstruct the process through which money as the means of the circulation of commodities becomes the automatic subject of capital. This process starts with the shift from the circulation of commodities, in which a commodity is exchanged for money in order to buy another commodity (C–M–C), to the circulation of money, in which a commodity is bought in order to be sold again (M–C–M); a circulation, in other words, whose “driving motive and determining goal is thus exchange value itself” (Marx 1990: 130). This shift is money’s first step in becoming the self-employed entity of capital: it leaves the finite circle of commodity exchange for the sake of their use-value to enter the infinite circulation of exchange value. At the beginning and the end of C–M–C we find concrete commodities that differ in quality, in M–C–M we find the same, money, making this movement a perfect, infinite circle – the end of the first contains the beginning of the second.<sup>16</sup> The goal of this process is solely the quantitative change of the amount of money that enters it, the production of surplus-value, the valorisation of value (*Verwertung des Wertes*) (ibid.: 131 ff.). In this endless process of circula-

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16 Marx invokes Aristotle at this point (1962: 167), who already seemed to have had an inkling of this bad infinity in his critique of *khrematistike*, the practice of exchange for the sake of exchange: “Money is torn from its political condition of mediating need to become the number of an artificial and convulsive movement. The infinite movement of accumulation is what empties the city of its self-presence by achieving the metamorphosis of goods into commodities; it is what scientifically converts time into the money form” (Alliez 1996: xvi).

tion, the autonomous forms of money and commodity which form the two poles of this process get dissolved in their continuous transformation into each other. This process of continuous transformation is precisely what Marx called the *automatic subject*:

Value, therefore, being the *general subject* [*das übergreifende Subjekt*] in such a process, and assuming at one time the form of money, at another that of commodities, but through all these changes preserving itself and expanding, it requires some independent form, by means of which its identity may at any time be established. And this form it possesses only in the shape of money. It is under the form of money that value begins and ends, and begins again, every act of its own *utilization* [*Verwertungsprozess*]. [...] Instead of simply representing the relations of commodities, it [value] enters now, so to say, into private relations with itself (Marx 1990: 134).<sup>17</sup>

Money as autonomous form of value and thus of the reification of abstract labour finds its double in this constitution of capital as automatic subject. Its inner sense, time, is the time of circulation, the time it takes to reproduce itself, to valorise itself (Alliez 1996: xviii). The time of the worker thus “gets levelled onto the plane of space” (loc. cit.) precisely because it only enters this process as a concrete commodity – labour-power, measured in time. But this measure is already reified through the value form: the quantum of time that is bought by capital can only appear as the quantity of a commodity, as reified, as a carcass. In other words, only as a petrified thing, not as flux, can

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<sup>17</sup> Translation amended, cf. Marx 1962: 169.

the time of the worker enter the circulation of capital, which – for capital – is temporality proper.

## V. Conclusion

So, to come back to the theoretical impasse that we have started with, the absence of a Marxist theory of time. We have seen throughout our analysis of the social totality of capitalism and the forms of thought it has brought about that one of its core features is to make such a theory progressively impossible. It is precisely this social – and, *mutatis mutandis*, this intellectual – structure that obstructs a qualitative theory of time; not by merely blurring its possibility, but by the material externalisation of time itself, by commodifying time, reifying it, reducing it to the time of circulation. From this point of view, a “Marxist theory of time” would not be the adequate counterpart to the “Marxist theory of history”; it would be its opposite. A theory of time that stays true to the Marxist analysis of capitalism can therefore be nothing else than the theory of the reification of time, a history of time passing into dead matter, of time becoming a carcass only to be appropriated by the automatic subject of capital. This theory of time would be at the same time a theory of subjectivity that shows the intricate relationship between historicity and class consciousness: throughout this impasse, subjectivity has shown itself to be a precarious entity. It is precisely because his time is labour time, because his time becomes spatial, defined by being external instead of internal, that the

worker becomes a pure object. He is no longer the subject of affection, it is capital itself which is affected by the worker's time. But – and this is the dialectical twist – because this order of appearance produces the worker as reified, as pure object, it produces the worker *as subject of history*. The question of class consciousness is thus also a question of temporalities: the proletariat is the class which is expropriated of its proper *time*. The connection between *history and class consciousness* is thus to be found in this very break of temporalities between the expropriated, reified time that enters the empty, endless time of circulation, and, as its opposite, history, the time in which capitalism as a mode of production emerged and the time in which it will thus end. Because the inner sense of the worker is completely externalised, destroyed, a new form of time can emerge, a time that is no longer internalised, a historical time, and with it emerges also the collective subjectivity of class struggle, of history:

Thus the purely abstract negativity in the life of the worker is objectively the most typical manifestation of reification, it is the constitutive type of capitalist socialisation. But for this very reason it is also subjectively the point at which this structure is raised to consciousness and where it can be breached in practice (Lukács 1971: 172).

To the same extent that capitalism, as a social totality, loses a qualitative category of time through the reification of human activity in the pure form of value through the objectification of the worker in the commodity, the worker as the subject of this totality gains the insight into the historicity of this process, as a practical insight, as the lever to class struggle. Class

consciousness in this sense can be defined as the insight into the historicity of the social totality as such, an insight that breaks with the empiricism embedded in revisionism and stays true to the Marxian formulation that the totality of capitalism can only be properly criticised through a critique of its categories. Revolution, then, is neither found in the shallow progress made through the time of circulation, nor is it a messianic event completely outside of time as such. It is the act of seizing the means of production in order to lift their separation from labour-power so that the commodification of labour-power and its subordination to the time of capital may finally come to an end.

*Received on 17/02/2023*

*Approved on 20/11/2023*

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